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RUE MORGUE

12 INFESTED

A duo of potent insect-run-amok movies will be infesting your eyeballs this spring, led by French filmmaker Sébastien Vaniček's eight-legged feature debut *Vermin* and Aussie filmmaker Kiah Roache-Turner, who spins a web of otherworldly proportion in *Sting*.

PLUS! A brief history of spiders in horror movies. by **ANDREA SUBISSATI AND PAUL CORUPE**

AUTACK OF THE PROPERTY OF THE

Novel versions of your favourite horror movies are making a comeback, and these are the names leading the resurgence.

PLUS! Think movie novelizations are mere reworkings of dusty old screenplays? Think again!

by JAMES BURRELL

26 MASTER OF THE MEAT PUPPETS

Having spellbound audiences with his stop-motion short films for the past two decades, Robert Morgan pulls back the curtain on the maddening technique in his first feature-length film.

PLUS! Venture further into the chilling worlds of Robert Morgan's filmography of shorts. by **MICHAEL GINGOLD**

30 NEW BLOOD IN THE WATER

Think it's safe to go back to the arcade? Modern-day pinball wizard Zach Sharpe dives deep into Stern's spectacular new *Jaws*-themed joy machines. by **JOHN W. BOWEN**

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DEBATE: Is fear of spiders a human instinct?



f you're inclined to read these editorials, you've likely learned quite a bit about Andrea Subissati by now: houseplant enthusiast, craft witch, proud mom to a spoiled Pomeranian, *Serbian Film* apologist, etc. Would it surprise you to know "arachnophobe" is on the list, even though I have not one but *two* spider tattoos?

It would seem contradictory for someone to so immortalize that which terrifies them, but let's be real; if you're reading this magazine, I needn't explain that fear and fascination are easy bedfellows (or friends with benefits, at least). When it comes to spiders, I respect their game – as a fellow tiny creature who craves being feared, I admire their ability to strike terror in the hearts of beings who could easily crush them whole. I enjoy any creature that lures its prey using craft and ingenuity as much as sheer animal appetite. And I think they're frankly beautiful in their hellish, spindly way; next to the bat, they're the poster children for the dark and macabre. If I had a nickel for every spiderweb motif that adorned the pages of *Rue Morgue* for design purposes, I could probably retire.

But that's not to say I won't let out a pathetic "eek" and go running to my partner to destroy the thing if I find one in my home (spider-slaying was an early prerequisite in my dating days; disqualifying several otherwise-worthy suitors). I enjoy spiders exactly the way I enjoy Freddy Krueger — out of clawed-arm's reach. I choose to actively disbelieve the rumour that x number of spiders crawl down our throats while we sleep (is nothing sacred?) and I also disavow the whole "they're not so bad because they kill other pests" nonsense. To put it bluntly, nothing is living in my home rent-free unless it's my precious yapping pup who lunges at our interns and terrifies the folks who deliver my mail and yet has never done anything wrong in his entire life. See what I mean? There isn't a lot of logic inherent in the creatures we love and hate, but if the effectiveness of movies like *Vermin* and *Sting* are any indication, I'm not the only one who revels in the sort of thrills that only eight-legged freaks can impart.

I watched the films with company, who enjoyed seeing their goth-ghoul boss-bitch friend jump and shriek when the critters attacked, but what /loved most about these movies was their use of subtext. Spiders represent many things conceptually, most of them nasty, but *Vermin* and *Sting* share a certain perspective on arachnid attacks in that they both take place in crumbling apartment complexes, afflicting residents who were already struggling to live before they were literally fighting for their lives. While most creature features orient their social commentary along the lines of humanity-fucks-with-nature-and-nature-bites-back, there's something darker at the heart of *Vermin* and *Sting*, where poverty, segregation, and socio-economic stereotyping have already splintered the communities under siege — indeed, one of *Vermin*'s most powerful scenes involves a tragic interaction between human neighbours, without a spider in sight.

So check out the films, read these interviews, and ask yourselves: are spiders really the villains here? Maybe not. But they best

keep the *fuck* out of my home, regardless. Eek!

ANDREA SUBISSATI andrea@rue-morgue.com

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RUE MORGUE #217 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Lloyd Warren, Kevin Conway, and Al McMullan.

RUE MORGUE #217 is dedicated to the memory of fan and friend Jeanie Schlegel (1971-2023). R.I.P.

Cover: Vermin
Design by Shane Mills

Rue Morgue magazine is published bi-monthly and accepts no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, photos, art or other materials. Freelance inquiries can be submitted at Rue-Morgue.com.

Funded by the Government of Canada Canada

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HEY RODRIGO, KUDOS TO YOU and Rue Morgue's horror empire. I've been a reader since 2005 and a repeat offender at the Festival of Fear for many years. I remember the year you brought George Romero and Dario Argento together on Toronto soil. Man, those were some good memories. Any chance of bringing the horror show back to Toronto? We sure could use it.

TONY FEDERICO, VIA EMAIL

Thanks Tony, you can join us every October just a short drive away in Niagara Falls for Frightmare in the Falls Horror Expo presented by Rue Morgue. Hope to see you!

SALUTATIONS! IT'S BEEN A WHILE since I saw any new Rue Morgue merch around and, as a proud owner of several t-shirts from your 20th anniversary line, I expected there would be more for your 25th. Any chance of bringing all of your past artists together for one shirt? Just a thought. Keep the horror coming.

AN OLD FAN, VIA EMAIL

I WATCHED CALVAIRE RECENTLY thanks to your cover story [in RM#211]. Whoa! This is why I love Rue Morgue, I can always expect you to be true to the cause. This independent movie which not one of my friends had even heard of – some refer to themselves as "horror" fans, haha - is so twisted and strange, I can't get enough of recommending it. Thanks *Rue Morgue* for keeping the true horror in your pages.

JOHNNY SAVAGE, VIA EMAIL

KUDOS TO THE MEXICAN HORROR PIECE [in RM#210], it seemed long overdue. I don't recall Rue ever doing anything like that even though I might be wrong. Huesera was not what I was expecting and it's always neat to find a movie that delves into strange [folklore] that I have never heard of. Satanic Hispanics seems to be promising which brings me to the next question: when is [Rodrigo] going to shoot his film in Mexico? Waiting for that one.

JEREMY T, VIA EMAIL

IRREVERSIBLE: THE STRAIGHT CUT hurt me but not as bad as the original cut. Thanks for the scars. RM rocks.

DAVE WATTS, VIA EMAIL

GREAT INSIGHT AND COMMENTARY. This is what makes RM the best source of horror info/commentary on the planet, likely in the universe. Thanks for such a great resource.

@JOEPORTER5972, VIA INSTAGRAM

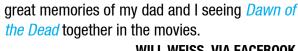


MET UP WITH CANADIAN HORROR film icon Lesleh Donaldson yesterday to plan for next month's Sudbury Indie Creature Kon (SICK) taking place in Sudbury, Ontario.

@NIGHTMARENODDERS, VIA INSTAGRAM

VAMPIRES: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE UNDEAD Was my first introduction to David J. Skal's work. Picked it up on impulse walking through the bookstore years ago, and didn't regret it. The commentary he provides in the anthology was an incredible resource to go along with the vampire tales within.

LACEY WALLACE, VIA FACEBOOK



WILL MISS DAVID EMGE VERY MUCH. I have many

WILL WEISS, VIA FACEBOOK

RE: THE REWIND ZONE on *Rue Morgue TV* – Fun review [of *Curse II: The Bite*]. I think I saw it very long ago. Didn't know the name. Screaming Mad George makes it worth a watch. I miss both the dark comedy and the fun absurdity the '80s could have. It wasn't just slashers and franchises.

@MY_TUBE9405, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: HORROR ON THE ROCKS on Rue Morgue TV -Could we please get Mike his own section in the magazine? Drink/movie recommendations from Whiskey Morgue!

@JOSHUAMCDANIEL2760, VIA YOUTUBE



OH, YOU KNOW, just chilling at @thegloryhole store.

@SUDBURIED13, VIA INSTAGRAM







CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

217

In 1478, George Plantagenet, the first Duke of Clarence, was executed by drowning in a barrel of wine; a death sentence he allegedly requested himself.

Both 1986 slashers *Slaughter High* and *Killer Party* were originally called *April Fool's Day*, but the films' titles were changed once their makers learned of the Paramount Pictures release of the same name.

In Chilean mythology, the Trauco were ugly, footless goblin-like creatures that lured women away with their sexual potency and were often blamed for unwanted pregnancies.

Historians still cannot conclusively identify the cause of the Cocoliztli Epidemic, a disease that killed up to fifteen million indigenous Mexicans during the 1500s.

The mask design of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (turning 70 this year) was based on a 17th-century woodcutting called The Sea Monk.

Filmmaker David Cronenberg turned down offers to direct *Return of the Jedi, Top Gun*, and *Robocop*, and was even set to helm *Total Recall* before Paul Verhoeven took over.

Leporiphobia is described as an intense fear of rabbits.

The famous showman William Castle began his directing career at just eighteen years of age, with a Bela Lugosi-led stage production of *Dracula*.

Musicians Mama Cass and Keith Moon died at the same age while staying in the same hotel room, four years apart.

When the SS *Badger State* sank after its cargo accidentally exploded in 1969, some sailors were lost due to attacking albatrosses.

The blackout scene in the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* was shot during the famous Northeast Blackout the year before. The crew used generators.

The first moth cocoon found in one of the victim's throats in *The Silence of the Lambs* was made from a combination of Tootsie Rolls and gummy bears, so it would be edible if swallowed.

Stephen King was not ignorant of the simi-

larities between *Carrie* and *Cinderella*, and even considered having the former leave a shoe behind at the prom as a nod to the folktale.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT? SEND IT TO: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM

RECORDING OFFICER



EXPIRING MINDS

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

What horror movie could never be novelized and why?

I want a *Friday the 13th* series of novels entirely from Jason's perspective.

STEVEN MCVEY, VIA FACEBOOK

A Serbian Film would be rough...

MATTHEW ST. CYR, VIA FACEBOOK

C.H.U.D. II: Bud the Chud. No one would read it.

JOHN SOWDER, VIA FACEBOOK

How do you novelize a vantage point of an entire movie from an upward 45 degree angle? That's rhetorical, you don't. If you tried to, it would turn into a Bob Vila book about baseboards and crown moulding.

@LEFTHANDED_RIGHTBRAINED, VIA INSTAGRAM

The irony is that *In the Mouth of Madness* would have probably been even better as a novel, and it's one of my favourite movies.

AARON SPINK, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS
AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA



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THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS

VANESSA AVALOS, VIA FACEBOOK

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ROM 8

SUSPIRIA AND THE GERMAN AUTUMN

Luca Guadagnino's 2018 version of *Suspiria* represents the best of

what a remake can be by recontextualizing the source material into something new and novel. In this case, screenwriter David Kajganich took the skeleton of Dario Argento's giallo/witch yarn and shifted the focus to the coven's internal turmoil, exploring the way our collective sins can fester and muddy the waters between hero and villain. What's particularly interesting is how Kajganich set his version in 1977; not only was that the year that the original Suspiria came out, it was also a particularly violent (and often overlooked) moment in history — the German Autumn.

In 1977, Germany was deeply divided both literally and figuratively, with the Berlin Wall still looming large as a barrier between the Soviet-occupied East Berlin and West Berlin of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the spring of that year, far-left militant group the Red Army Faction (RAF) launched a series of terrorist attacks beginning with the assassinations of Siegfried Buback, Jürgen Ponto,

and Hanns Martin Schleyer. The attacks culminated in the infamous hijacking of Lufthansa Flight 181, where they enlisted the help of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to ransom the 90-plus passengers and crew members in exchange for captured RAF members.

In Suspiria, political domination comes in the form of Mother Suspirium, who cleans house at the Markos Dance Academy by obliterating all of the witches who tried to usurp power in the coven. In real life, political opposition to the RAF attempted similar tactics. During the Lufthansa Flight 181 incident, all but one of the hijackers were killed by an elite special forces unit of the German Federal Police. Then, in October of 1977, several RAF members who had been arrested over the course of the year were found dead in their cells. Official reports claim they committed suicide, but surviving members claim their deaths were actually covert executions.

Much like *Suspiria*'s ending, it remains debatable who the heroes and villains really were over the course of 1977 in Germany. But perhaps the most relevant quote on the

subject comes from "Frau Wilde," a German survivor who appeared in the 1978 documentary that gave the German Autumn its name: "When cruelty has reached a certain point, it no longer matters who is responsible – it simply has to stop."

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ...

Stephen Spinella, "Major Knox" from Ravenous

Cult cannibal-western *Ravenous* stumbled deliriously into US theatres 25 years ago this spring, and promptly bombed. On the plus side, it did showcase the talents of double Tony Award winner and gay rights campaigner Stephen Spinella as Major Knox who, prior to his date with Fort Spencer's soup pot, had delivered a career-making performance in Tony Kushner's seminal AIDS crisis play *Angels in America* as Louis, a role written especially for him. Spinella's post-*Ravenous* career has seen him amass prolific prime-time

TV credits (24, Elementary, The Blacklist) and feature in several critically acclaimed movies (Lincoln, Can You Ever Forgive Me?) but he returned to the play that made his name in 2018. Since 2019, he has been a cast member of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child on Broadway, playing Vernon Dursley, Severin Snape and... Lord Voldemort!

LOUIS FLETCHER



NEEUFUL THINGS

RESIDENT EVIL FIRST AID DRINK COLLECTOR'S BOX \$250 CAD

She may be on the pricier side of your average Needful Thing, but there's no denying that this collector's box is pretty cool. Capcom has teamed up with Game Flavor to deliver a home mixology experience inspired by the iconic survival items from the *Resident Evil* game franchise. The box contains ten 330ml "first aid spray" cans of cucumber/lime/mint soda, four "ink ribbon cartridges" containing colourful herbs (hibiscus, matcha, turmeric, and aronia), and recipe cards for how to mix it all up into mocktails fit for a Nemesis.

Gameflavor.com

REGAN MACNEIL GLOW IN THE DARK VINYL FIGURE \$24 CAD

Move over, Funko Pop! There's a new collectible in town, packaged in stackable square boxes and bearing the likenesses of our favourite horror characters. Handmade by Robots figures appear to be made of knit fabric but they're actually soft vinyl. The full-size line includes the likes of Grandpa Sawyer, Ghostface, Michael Myers, and frozen Jack Torrance, but the Regan MacNeil figure takes the proverbial cake with her backwards-facing head and glow-in-the-dark vomit!

Hmbr.fans

SHARK MARY JANE PLATFORM SHOES \$89.99 USD

Need a bigger pair of boats? No problem. These shark-infested platform Mary Janes by Hot Chocolate Design are available in all sizes, with non-marking rubber soles, adjustable buckle strap, and a cushioned interior, to boot. Perfect for your next trip to Amity Island.

Hotchocolatedesign.com

BEAT IT, CREEP SUNGLASSES
\$13 USD

Good style should cut like a knife, making these edgy, vintage-inspired sunnies a must-have for this summer slasher season. Made in durable black acetate and featuring skull rivets and knives at the hinges, they come polarized with 100% UV protection for your eyes (though we can't promise any such safety for your victims).

666hexes.com

VINTAGE HORROR NEWSPAPER POSTERS \$22 USD

Tired of the usual horror poster art that everyone's got on their walls? From the Haddonfield Tribune to the Sidewinder Post, these faux newspaper article posters beg for closer inspection as their headlines tease at some of our favourite fictional crime sprees. Printed in high resolution on 8 x 10-inch premium, tearproof paper, they come with double-sided adhesive dots for easy mounting.

Amazon.com





THE THE PARTY OF T

From dismembered torsos to creatures stitched together from the limbs of the dead, many an artist has specialized in wringing fear out of bodily destruction and

tearing down the corporeal essence of humanity. But finding beauty in the macabre is another matter, one that sculptor Michael Locascio of Dellamorte & Co. specializes in with his anatomically detailed sculptures inspired by the human body, alongside his cabal of cryptids and ghouls.

"My classical sculpture training focused on the fundamentals of anatomy and proportion," he tells *Rue Morgue*. "I try to keep that in mind while designing a new piece; I feel it gives it life and dynamism, and I find beauty in the ways our bodies function."

Locascio studied live models, skeletons, and dissected cadavers to familiarize himself with the intricate details of mortality. From corkscrews modelled after the pelvic bone and meticulous recreations of the uterus to spectral skulls and skeletons intertwined, his work provides a showcase for the elegant

beauty of our raw materials - a fact

union.

that often provokes a powerful response in his customers. An engaged couple, for example, were so moved by his anatomical heart vase that they commissioned a custom recreation to use as the centrepiece of their wedding – with a special tweak to represent their spiritual

"They wanted it as a three-dimensional puzzle, so I cut the anatomical heart into

> pieces, re-moulded them and had them attach with magnets," he says.

While Locascio specializes in the human body, much of his work reflects an interest in cryptozoology and the anatomy of hidden creatures. Legendary beasts like the phoenix, dire

والمراجع المتحديل والمتراء والمراف والمراب والمساف والمراوية والمساف والمراجع المتحدث المتحدث والمتاب والمساف والمراوية

wolf, chupacabra, and kraken spring to life in detailed sculptures that merge the artist's trademark biological accuracy with an understanding of mythology and the occult.

"I am often drawn to the motifs of death, mortality, and rebirth," he reveals. "The characters who are outsiders, alienated, and misunderstood – it's those figures I find inspiring, and I try to bring them to life in a manner that isn't sensationalized."

Whether mythological or anatomical, Locascio's exquisitely detailed sculptures manage to shine a compassionate light on the reality of death.

"Our culture has both a fear and fascination with the macabre," he explains. "Part of the draw is that the emotions the macabre evokes can be so visceral, and many aspects of the topic are on the taboo side that we can't help but find beauty in it. Memento mori is a recurring theme in my work, and while remembering our mortality, our physical frailty can be morbid, it can also be life-affirming. An awareness of life's transience can give it meaning, help us appreciate what we have while we are able to." Find *Dellamorte & Co.* on Etsy.

JENN ADAMS



WORLD'S GREATEST MAD MONSTER SERIES 2

(Figures Toy Company/Classic TV Toys, 2005)

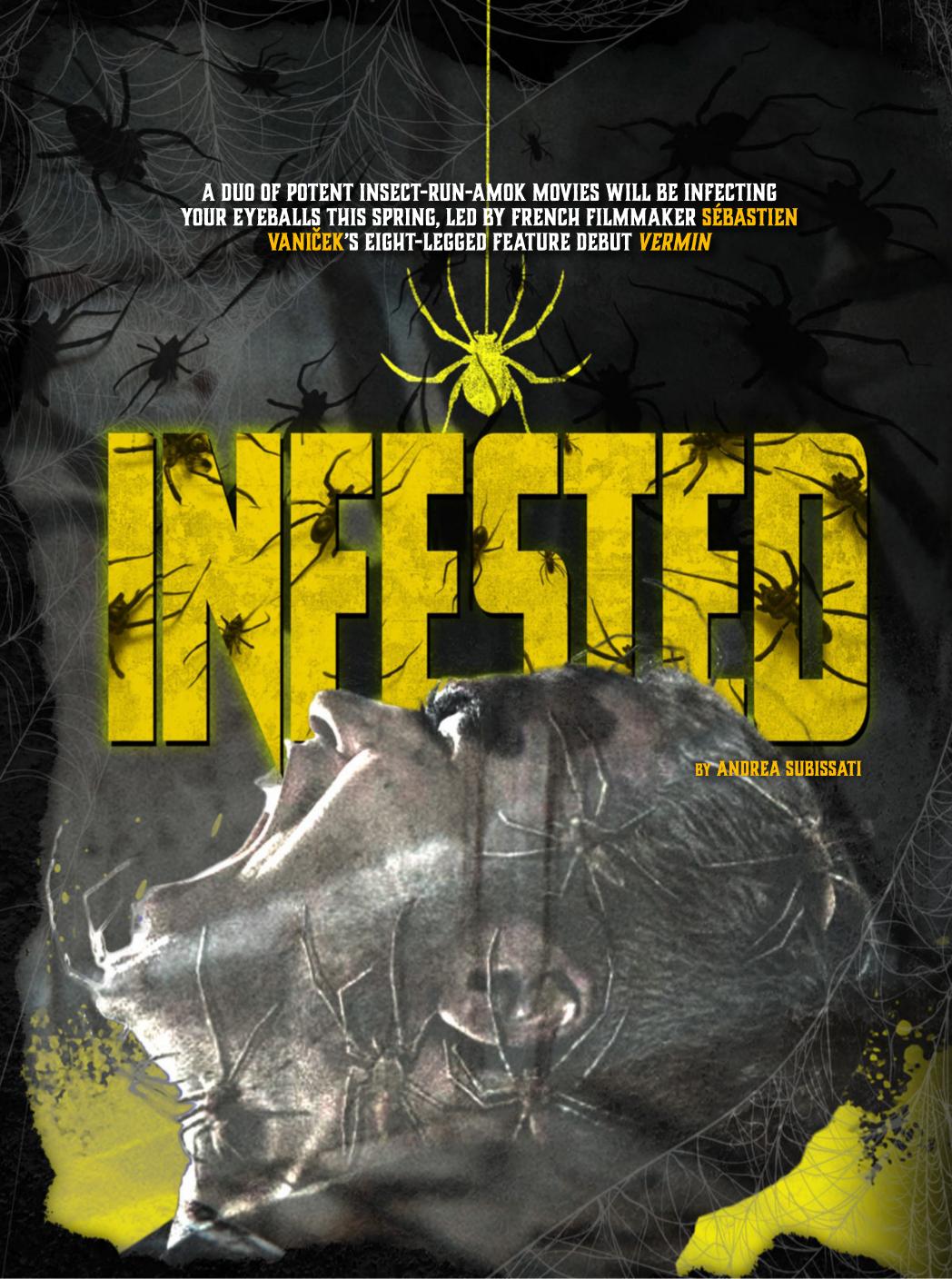
In the mid-1970s, famed toy company Mego Corporation released a set of four monsters — the Dreadful Dracula, the Monster Frankenstein, the Human Wolfman, and the Horrible Mummy — as part of its "Mad Monster Series" of articulated 8-inch figures with fabric clothing. Thirty years later, Rhode Island-based Figures Toy Company/ Classic TV Toys reissued reproductions of the original four figures, along with a subsequent second wave of new characters in a set dubbed "Mad Monster Series 2." The new offerings were comprised of the Grim Reaper, the Gruesome Ghost, the Salem Witch, and the Demonic Devil.

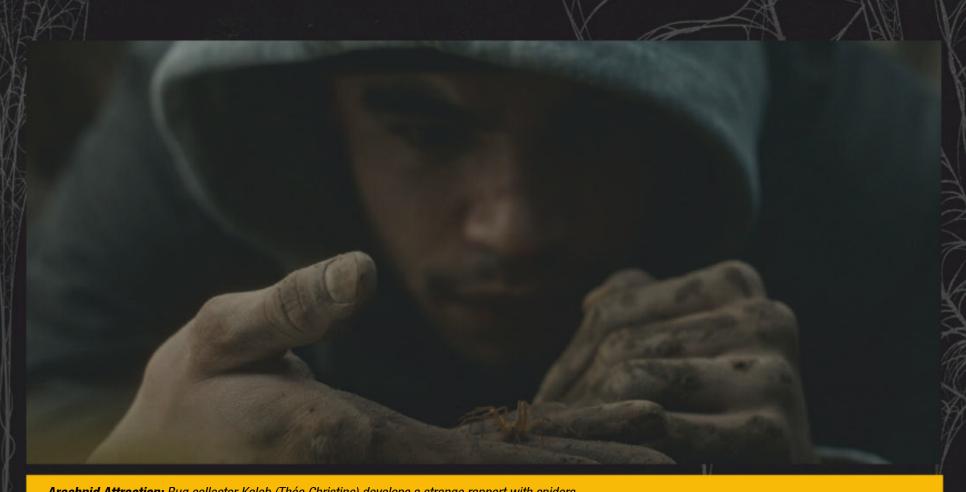
Like their predecessors, the figures feature retro-designed clothing (the Gruesome Ghost is a standout with its fantastically creepy face, blue rooted hair, and unusual-looking outfit crafted from yarn), accessories (scythe, pitchfork, and broom), and vintage 1970s-styled packaging. Seemingly produced in limited quantities, Series 2 figures are more difficult to find in the aftermarket, though a set was sold on eBay late last year for around \$100.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM







Arachnid Attraction: Bug collector Kaleb (Théo Christine) develops a strange rapport with spiders.

he horrors of vermin are all too common for those of us who occupy major cities — whether it's rats, mice, or cockroaches, they're ubiquitous enough to be grudgingly accepted as the occasional, inevitable free-loader of a flatmate. But historically, the word vermin was also used as a derogatory term for segments of the human population most likely to be afflicted by those pests: namely, the poor. For French filmmaker Sébastien Vaniček, who came of age in the segregated suburbs outside of Paris, that dual entendre provided inspiration for his

cinematic bon moment — a strikingly original horror film where vermin of one sort are pitted against the other, even as the outside world sees them as one and the same. That film is Vermin, premiering on Shudder from IFC Films this spring after racking up wins at Sitges, Fantastic Fest, and the French César National Film Awards.

It opens in the Moroccan desert, where heavily armed men hunt deadly sand spiders for the creepy critter black market, losing one of their crew to a vio-

is then transported and sold to French twenty-something Kaleb (Théo Christine), a rare bug enthusiast who funds his odd hobby by hustling specialty running shoes to the neighbourhood sneaker freaks. When said spider gets loose, it multiplies at an alarming rate, spreading rapidly throughout the apartment complex and claiming

victims by the floor. Kaleb finds himself on a desperate mission to contain, escape, or survive the infestation with a motley crew made up of his sister Manon (Lisa Nyarko), quirky BFF Mathys (Jérôme Niel), former childhood friend Jordy (Finnegan Oldfield), and wrong-place-wrong-time municipal officer Lila (Sofia Lesaffre).

It's a bad situation, but things were kinda shit for these folks before the spiders came into the mix – to call the housing complex decrepit would be an understatement, and Kaleb and Manon have been on the outs since the recent

> passing of their mother. In fact, everyone in the building is at each others' throats for one reason or another, meddling in each others' affairs, and making presumptions about their lifestyles, a fact which serves to heighten their despair as old grudges and preconceptions make fertile ground for a spider to lay her deadly eggs. It isn't long before the building's hallways and basements are nightmare labyrinths of thick webbing, with hordes of deadly arachnids skittering to and fro. Then

lent end in the process. The eight-legged import the police arrive, but they're not necessarily on a is then transported and sold to French twenty-

Vermin delivers what creature feature lovers would expect – chills and cringe aplenty as the critters find new and novel ways to enter our most intimate spaces (think showers and shoes) – but there's a permeating sense of doom that sets it apart from most trapped-in-an-apart-

ment-building scenarios of its ilk. Expect none of the warm and fuzzies where a community comes together to vanquish a common threat à la *Attack the Block*; this is *[REC]*-meets-*Arachnophobia* turned up to twelve in a setting so common, it may as well be a few streets away. For lifelong animal lover Vaniček, the eight-legged extras (many of them actual arachnids!) are less the villains of his story than fellow victims, but that doesn't make them any less terrifying.

Rue Morgue caught the director after he finished serving jury duty at Gérardmer Film Festival to discuss spider wrangling, French housing projects, and the tangled web we weave when we treat fellow human beings as little more than vermin.

What made you want to tackle a horror movie about spiders for your first feature film?

The first idea was the will to make something for the audience, to make something that makes you feel something quite strong in the theatre. I just had the idea of the movie I wanted to see as an audience [member], and the spiders came after. I understood that I wanted to talk about the condition of suburbanites in France and how they are treated for how they look or where they come from. It's the same when you see a spider in your living room or in your bathroom - you immediately want it out or you want to kill it. So, it's an interesting point of view because in France, suburbanites are treated the same way: they are not well treated because of how they are dressed, how they talk. I think all monster movies about bugs are about xenophobia and it's important to show some dark side of humanity using monsters.

Spider movies have a reputation for some-

times being kind of cheesy. What made you confident that Vermin would not suffer from that fate?

It was just my job! I wanted to go really away from those B-movies, they have bad reputations. When you say "spider movies," you'll always think about, you know, big 3-D spiders, and they have human voices and they scream and they are always big monsters. The first thing that I said to my team is that I didn't want to go away from reality, it has to be realistic. The spiders had to act like real spiders, they just move fast, they are afraid, they attack when they are in danger. So it was just the realistic point of view. I had to have the most realistic spider movie since *Arachnophobia*. This was the goal.

What percentage of the spiders in your film are real versus digital effects?

I think it's like 50/50. We had 200 real spiders on the set, so we were able to do real stuff with them. And as soon as I understood that I was able to have nice shots with them, I immediately said to my team, "Okay, we will do the most we can do with real spiders." We did it because obviously it's cheaper, because 3-D effects are kind of expensive.

"I HAD TO HAVE THE MOST REALISTIC SPIDER MOVIE SINCE *ARACHNOPHOBIA*. THIS WAS THE GOAL."

- FILMMAKER SÉBASTIEN VANIČEK

How difficult was it to shoot with real spiders?

It was kind of easy, because they are really simple creatures: they run fast when they have energy and they don't move when they don't have energy anymore. So they can run for about ten seconds and after this ten seconds, they are completely tired and they don't move anymore. So as soon as you understand that if you need the spiders to go from this point to this point, you have to have spiders with a lot of energy. If you need a slow spider on the wall, you have to let that spider walk around for about ten or twenty seconds, and after, you will be able to do whatever you want. But they are really nice and fragile creatures, and they are more afraid of you than you are afraid of them. You have to understand them, and you will see that they are nice creatures.

So you're not afraid of spiders?

I'm not, but some of the actors were – the two actresses, Sofia and Lisa. But they managed to work with them, and they treated their arachnophobia by working with them and they under-



Eight-Legged Extras: Over 200 of **Vermin**'s cast were actual spiders, presenting a challenge for some of the cast and crew.

stood the spiders. When you are able to hold a spider in your hand, you understand how small they are...

Nope, let's talk about something else. Where did you shoot the film's opening, and what were your thoughts about including this scene in the film?

It was in Morocco, in the middle of the desert. My DOP found this place when he did a short movie. It was important for me to have this opening scene because I had to respect the [conventions] of genre films, when you see where your monster is from. It was important to have this realistic point of view and in order to have this realistic point of view, it was important to understand why the spiders were so violent towards humans – because they were victims in the first place. They were hunted and caught in boxes, and they arrived in Paris and they didn't ask for [any of it]. So it was important to see the spiders as victims in the opening scene.

Tell me about the apartment building you

used in the film. It's very unusual looking.

It was in Noisy-le-Grand, which is the city I grew up in, in the suburbs of Paris; like 30 minutes by train from Paris. It's this kind of neighbourhood where everybody knows each other. I grew up in this kind of neighbourhood and I don't know if you know, but in France, there is this [trend] of films that are like suburban movies; they're always about drugs and problems and people who need money. It's always dramas. I grew up in the suburbs, and I wanted to show something nicer [about them]. Everybody knows each other, everybody helps each other, everybody respects each other. It's like a small family; maybe you don't like your uncle or something like that, but it's still your uncle. And when you grow up in this kind of building, you know all your neighbours So it was important to show these kinds of characters and the best way to show it, for me, was to shoot in the city I grew up in.

It's funny to me that you should mention how the residents of the building are like a family because I found them so antagonistic with

DESPITE THEIR STATUS AS COMMON HOUSEHOLD CREATURES, SPIDERS AND ARACHNIDS CONTINUE TO WEAVE A COMPLEX SAGA OF CINEMATIC FRIGHT

ARACHNO CIMENIO

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPIDERS IN HORROR MOVIES

BY PAUL CORUPE

rom black widows and tarantulas to orb weavers and daddy long-legs, nothing gets us reaching for insect repellent faster than the thought of spiders scurrying across our kitchen floors. While most common house spiders don't pose any real threat - and can actually help control other domestic pests - horror movies have long tapped into our arachnid anxieties, playing up their grotesquely hairy features, piercing mandibles, and cold-blooded predatory traps. Whether it's characters brushing past cobwebs in haunted basements, giant mutant spiders crushing buildings, or venomous creepy crawlies overrunning cities, the long, sticky strands of arachnid cinema history are guaranteed to get your spider senses - and your spine – tingling.

Not surprisingly, the first movie spiders and similar insectoids can be traced all the way back to the dawn of cinema. Eight-legged invaders make notable appearances during nightmare sequences in Georges Méliès' silent short *Baron Munchausen's Dream* (1911), as well as Paramount's 1920 adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. However, spiders didn't become integral plot elements until 1946's *The Spider Woman Strikes Back*, a fun Universal chiller featuring a laboratory full of arachnids used to create a deadly toxin.

At the dawn of the atomic age of the 1950s, gargantuan spiders really came into their own as a horror movie mainstay. Jack Arnold's *Tarantula!* (1955) is one of the best of the era, featuring a real live "giant" spider attacking humans via groundbreaking composite effects. While *Tarantula!* remains far superior to web-slinging entries such as *Mesa of Lost Women* (1953), *World Without End* (1956),

and *Earth vs the Spider* (1958), Arnold soon outdid himself with a heart-pounding sequence in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), in which a miniature scientist battles an aggressive household spider.

On the hairy heels of Arnold's films, the 1970s saw a resurgence in spider cinema as part of a nature-run-amok trend. Who could forget Bill Rebane's hilarious *The Giant Spi*-

der Invasion (1975), in which the director dressed up his car in a hairy multi-legged suit? Much better is the TV movie Tarantulas: The Deadly Cargo (1977) or the similar Kingdom of the Spiders (1977), which pits William Shatner against thousands of tarantulas taking over his town.

By the 1980s, Italian filmmakers started to incorporate wildly unsettling spider sequences in films such as *The Beyond* (1981), *Phenomena* (1985) and,

most conspicuously, *The Spider Labyrinth* (1988). One of the best-loved spider movies of all, *Arachnophobia* (1990), was also released around this time, featuring a strain of venomous pests slipping into shower drains and popcorn bowls to bite unsuspecting victims. Almost as memorable is the 1990 adaptation of Stephen King's *It*, in which Pennywise appears as a weird, web-spinning creature – imagery reflected in the 2017 re-

make.

If *Arachnophobia* relied more on subtlety, then *Eight Legged Freaks* (2002) and the films that soon followed showed the destructive power of spiders dead set on city-wide carnage. Audiences were soon inundated with a steady stream of Syfy cable TV films and low-budget releases, including *Camel Spiders* (2011), *Arachnoquake* (2012), *Spi-*

ders 3D (2013), and Lavalantula (2015), that overloaded discount DVD bins with dodgy computer effects and campy, over-the-top antics. Mike Mendez's Big Ass Spider! (2013) was a standout that got a short theatrical run and an award-winning home video release.

More recently, directors have sought to restore spiders to their former creepy, unsettling glory. One only needs to witness the unnerving "Red Spot" segment of *Scary Sto*-

ries to Tell in the Dark (2019), the macabre atmosphere of Itsy Bitsy (2019) or the Chinese creep-out Giant Spider (2021) to see how these cinematic creepers continue to evolve for today's viewers. From their beginning as unsettling nightmare imagery to modern-day arachnids, these and other contemporary films ensure that scary spiders continue to keep horror audiences entangled in a web of intrigue.



A CHILLS IN COUTER SPACE

BY ANDREA SUBISSATI

o an Australian, exposure to giant, deadly spiders is a part of everyday life. But that doesn't mean native Aussies like Kiah Roache-Turner, whose alien-spider creature feature *Sting* hits theatres April 12, have to like it.

"I've got intense arachnophobia," admits Roache-Turner. "I've had a few times where you wake up in the morning and you draw back the curtains and there's a Huntsman [spider, just inches] from your face. And it's as big as your hand! And if you move near them, they move, and they move so quick... that's not fun for somebody with arachnophobia."

But Roache-Turner has certainly had fun with *Sting*, spinning a yarn with the same heart and humour that permeated his 2014 breakout debut *Wyrmwood* and its 2021 sequel, *Wyrmwood: Apocalypse*.

In the film, a mysterious egg hurtles down from space, landing in a rundown NYC apartment building. Tween Charlotte (Alyla Browne) adopts the eight-legged hatchling and keeps her

in a jar, naming her Sting and feeding her cockroaches. But Charlotte's secret pet is no ordinary spider — growing rapidly with every meal and developing an ability to mimic her owner's whistles, Sting soon develops an appetite for larger fare... and the building's pets start going missing.

Arachnophobic though he is, Roache-Turner is well aware that there are folks out there like Charlotte who admire the strange predators and keep them as companions. But in researching for the film (and probing his own psyche), he also acknowledges that there's a universality to the common phobia, one that seems to stem from the creature's unique physiology.

"I think spiders are the antithesis to the shape of humans," he surmises. "I think that at the core of what horror is, or at the core of even what fear is, it's the fear of the *other*; something that is different from us. Something we can't emotionally relate to, like a little black thing with eight legs. And even just the

way they deal with their daily business! They lay their eggs in things and they eat their partners; they really are like eight-legged serial killers. They don't look like they belong on Earth, and they look like they're ready for violence and pain. They look like they're designed to run at you and bite you."

As such, it was of utmost importance to Roache-Turner that his nightmare creature serve up a copious amount of the same heebie-jeebies as its real-life counterpart. To that end, the filmmaker made use of both digital and practical effects to bring the titular spider to life.

"Basically, anytime it's a wide shot, where the spider is moving quickly, it's digital, and anytime it's a close-up or a medium [shot] interacting with the actors, it's the puppet," he explains. "We were gonna get a spider wrangler in [but] it was time, we just didn't have it. Anytime you see the little tiny spider moving, that's all digital. But I tried to hide it behind glass or in shadow as much as possible, or just backlight it very minimally so you only get the shape of it, which is where you get that great little scene when the spider goes in someone's mouth. That's a horrifying thing!"

Horrifying indeed, and yet Charlotte is immediately drawn to Sting, perhaps seeing aspects of herself in this lonely and misunderstood creature. Living in a crumbling apartment building with her mom Heather (Penelope Mitchell, Hellboy), stepdad Ethan (Ryan Corr), and their new baby, Charlotte escapes into the world of comic books to forget about grown-up concerns, including her deadbeat dad. Also residing in the apartment complex are Charlotte's lovable but easily confused grandma (Noni Hazlehurst), her nasty great-aunt Gunter (Robyn Nevin) who owns the building, the grieving alcoholic Maria (Silvia Colloca, Van Helsing), and the eccentric biology grad student Erik (Danny Kim). Add hapless exterminator Frank (Jermaine Fowler, *The Blackening*) to the mix and you've got one sumptuous spider feast.

It might seem strange that an Australian arachnophobe would set his story all the way in wintry NYC, when the nastiest examples of the critters in question roam freely in his own backyard. Like a kid keeping bugs in a jar, that decision was purely to contain the action within the confines of a winter storm (Roache-Turner cites the isolation of *Alien* and *The Thing* as inspiration for the frigid setting). But the crumbling state of the apartment complex and the individual struggles of its residents turn the building into a character of its own.

"The economic situation is definitely an undercurrent in the story," he says, "that this family is in dire straits and they're trapped with an evil landlord. I was hoping that if I write carefully enough, [audiences would realize] they're sort of trapped in the web of this evil old woman while



Charlotte's Web: Sting makes a lovable pet to lonely girl Charlotte, until her appetite threatens the whole building.

they're also trapped in the web of the story. The economy was a part of it in that I wrote this just at the start of COVID... [Australia] had one of the biggest fires in history — I think a billion animals died in these massive bushfires — and those bushfires kind of went through my house. We had to find alternative living, and it was quite difficult. I just had a baby at the same time and the film industry collapsed, so we all had to scramble."

One bright side of making *Sting* was that Roache-Turner's proven track record of turning out genre crowd-pleasers meant that he didn't have to aggressively crowdsource funding the way he did for *Wyrmwood*, made on a shoestring budget and co-written with his brother Tristan. The siblings also wrote the sequel, *Wyrmwood: Apocalypse*, together, as well as the 2018 action-comedy *Nekrotronic*, starring Monica Bellucci.

"We went into filmmaking together, just because we loved working together and rock-androlling and making movies," says Roache-Turner of making his first film without his brother's creative input. "[Tristan] doesn't love producing, he loves making movies, and so much of making movies as a producer is about dealing with the industry. And so, after *Wyrmwood 2*, he kind of

went, 'Dude, I gotta go back to a normal job.' So he just retired from the crazy industry because we made enough films together. This is the first official Kiah Roache-Turner film. I wrote it from the ground up — it's all my vision, and it's different from the other ones."

What remains consistent throughout the Roache-Turner filmography up to now is a sense of heart amid the chaos, with realistic characters going through less-than-realistic scenarios in a refreshingly realistic manner.

Sting, however, does serve to debunk one popular myth about arachnophobia — exposure therapy claims that increased contact with the critters in question can cure the fearful of their affliction. For Roache-Turner, the long-standing grudge remains.

"I thought making *Sting* would be cathartic," he admits. "I thought if I go to the thing that I'm scared of, somehow it will help me with my fear. And the answer is, I am still 100 percent scared of spiders. It has not helped at all. If anything, it's made it worse because I've had to stare at those things for so long. Now my nightmares are more specific, because I've had to study spiders for so long. No, I hate them. They're disgusting serial killers. I hate spiders."



- FILMMAKER SÉBASTIEN VANIČEK

one another.

For me, the problems [in the film] come from outside of the suburbs, so you have to react, you have to deal with it. And inside the building, it's like a family, so you have a character who will represent the mother, this character who represents the grandfather, the uncle, the big brother, the [little] brother, etc. The problems come from the outside and they will have to react to it and protect each other. This is like the first thing that Kaleb wants to do, when he understands that the building is in deep trouble. He tells his sister that he can't [leave], he has to help [neighbours] Claudia [Marie-Philomène Nga], Mr. Benzaoui [Abdellah Moundy]. He has to help everybody.

There's also a sense in the film that the police don't have the best interests of the citizenry at heart. Are spiders even the villains of this film?

I don't think so. When you see the movie, you understand that at some points the spiders are also victims. So the antagonist will change and you will understand that maybe the problem comes from the people who trapped them inside this building. I didn't want to do a movie that is black or white, so when you hear the police talk, you understand that they try to do their best, but it's the first time that they had this kind of situation so they do everything they can and they have orders, but they don't know how to react. The

movie is just about how people don't hear each other. There is a problem with dialogue in this movie; nobody hears each other.

Two of your previous short films involved canine protagonists. What does the animal world have to teach us about ourselves?

I'm deeply into animal protection; it's really important for me to give a voice to creatures that don't have a voice. I think all my career, all my movies will have something to do with animals because it's really important. I think that your relationship with animals tells a lot about you. As I told you, monster movies are about xenophobia but I think that your relationship with animals can tell you if you're a monster or not. And I love to make monstrous humans, because there is no evil in nature. You can have evil humans, but you will never have evil animals. So it was important that the spiders were not evil, they are not monsters, they just have to survive.

The tension is very high throughout the entire film. Were there any other films that influenced you toward maintaining that high energy level?

I try to stay away from references and things like that to be able to have my own movie and my own voice, but one of the movies that had a deep impact on me was *Green Room* from Jeremy Saulnier. When I saw this punk band trapped in this concert room, trying to get away, it was so

intense. And the group worked really well; I was [always] with the characters. That was a movie that is closest to mine, I think, because it's just about survival, and you have characters that try to [escape] a building.

Will you continue making horror films? And what are you working on next?

I'm working on something kind of big, but I'm not able to talk about it. It will be English-language, and I was approached by a big studio and everything, but there is something with French directors in the U.S. where [we] have to be protective, we want creative control, we want the final cut — it's really impossible to have the final cut with big studios, so it was a lot of talks. Here is one project where I'll have everything that I wanted and I can write it, I will direct it, I will do the editing, I will do everything that I want. And it will be in English so I'm kind of happy to make an English-tongue movie. But it's not that I can't talk about it, it's that I'm superstitious... I want to sign everything first.

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1970 • Not Rated • Run Time: 103 Mins. • Genre: Horror/Exploitation All Regions • Widescreen 2.35:1 • Audio: English (1.0 DTS-HD MA) Optional Subtitles: English SDH, Français, Español



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Blue Underground is proud to present the most complete and uncensored version of NIGHT OF THE BLOOD MONSTER (also known as THE BLOODY JUDGE) from a brand-new 2023 Dolby Vision HDR 4K master, painstakingly restored from various European vault elements featuring additional nudity, bloodshed and what Christopher Lee himself calls "scenes of extraordinary depravity!"

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 - Bloody Jess Interviews with Director Jess Franco and Star Christopher Lee
 - Judgement Day Interview with Stephen Thrower,

Author of "Murderous Passions: the Delirious Cinema of Jesus Franco"

- In The Shadows Interviews with Filmmaker Alan Birkinshaw and Author Stephen Thrower on Harry Alan Towers
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NOVEL VERSIONS OF YOUR FAVOURITE HORROR MOVIES ARE MAKING A COMEBACK, AND THESE ARE THE NAMES LEADING THE RESURGENCE

ATTACK OF THE STAMES BURRELL

orror fans have it pretty good these days; we can watch movies anytime of the night or day (even on our phones while commuting to and from work), we can listen to newly released soundtracks on vinyl, collect action figures, meet our heroes at conventions, and completely immerse ourselves with the culture online. But long before smartphones, the internet, and even home video, one of the few ways people revisited their favourite fright flicks was by reading one of the many novelizations available on the racks of the local supermarket or drugstore.

Typically released to coincide with a film's debut to theatre and drive-in screens, these paperback (though occasionally also hardcover) adaptations were prized possessions for those who couldn't wait to relive the thrills and chills of a particular movie. And for fans not quite old enough to get into theatres, the books offered a way to "watch" those movies they couldn't otherwise see.

Novelizations have been with us since the advent of cinema itself. Most early horror "tie-in" novels were simply hardcover reprints (dubbed

"photoplay editions") of works such as Gaston Leroux's Phantom of the Opera and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, but featuring illustrations and dust jacket artwork from the Universal classics. Original novels adapted from a film's screenplay also came to be written, including for 1933's King Kong and 1954's Creature from the Black Lagoon, but the medium really came into its own in the 1960s, which saw novelizations for giant monsters-on-the-loose movies, Hammer horror films, and Roger Corman-directed adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's works. The heyday of the horror novelization was arguably the 1970s and '80s, when the films of George A. Romero, David Cronenberg, Brian De Palma, and John Carpenter were adapted into book form; author David Seltzer was novelizing his own screenplays for The Omen (1976) and Prophecy (1979); and even slasher icons Jason Voorhees and Freddy Krueger made the jump from movie screens onto the printed page.

The 1990s and onward saw fewer original horror novelizations; many were simply reprints of a movie's source material, such as Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* or



the latest Stephen King adaptation featuring covers with movie poster art. The past decade has seen reissues of Alan Dean Foster's *Alien* saga, repackaged movie tie-ins for Joe Hill's *Horns* and *The Black Phone*, and novelizations for the David Gordon Green-directed *Halloween* trilogy (with many of these released by UK-based Titan Books). And even if few other titles are coming from the mainstream publishing industry, the medium is experiencing a resurgence thanks to a small, passionate group of indie companies who have entered the mix.

ENCYCLOPOCALYPSE PUBLICATIONS

Founded in 2018 by writer/producer Mark Alan Miller, Encyclopocalypse Publications has released newly penned novelizations of 1970s, '80s, and '90s cult flicks, including the 1978 Australian offering Long Weekend (by Brett Mc-Bean); 1980's Scared to Death (by Matt Serafini); the 1986 Grace Jones vampire fest Vamp and 1997's Wishmaster (both adapted by Christian Francis); as well as reprints of long-out-of-print titles such as Fright Night (penned by John Skipp and Craig Spector), Re-Animator (from

LONG
WEEKEND

Their other total then pairs
active found then pairs

A Novelization by
BRETT MCBEAN

Jeff Rovin), and *Blue Sunshine* (by Ken Johnson). Miller, who was once vice president of Clive Barker's production company Seraphim Films, and spearheaded efforts to restore the icon's 1990 film *Nightbreed*, cites his work digitizing Barker's library as setting him on the road to publishing.

"Most of [Clive's] titles had gone out of

print," he recalls. "From that, I learned many of the ins and outs of the process. And, because of the nature of the job, I made friends with lots of authors. When my daughter was born in 2016, I wanted to find a job that would allow me to work from home instead of commuting and spending

three hours every day on the road. Taking my knowledge of digital publishing, I reached out to all the other authors I knew who had books that were out of print. Everyone said yes, and from there, it was a classic example of, 'If you build it, they will come.'"

After launching the company with the release of his novel *Hell-raiser: The Toll*, Miller set about acquiring other licences. As he had anticipated, his prior collaborations with heavy hitters in the genre made it possible for him to



riginal New York set Jeff Lieberman



FRIGHT
The Novelization

A novel by John Skipp & Craig Spector
Based on the screenplay by Tom Holland

Page Turners: Novelizations of popular horror movies provide fans with another way to enjoy their favourite fright fare.

re-release some classic novelizations.

"I had collaborated with Tom Holland and Brian Yuzna, both of whom had access to the rights for *Fright Night* and *Re-Animator*, respectively," says Miller. "So, novelizations were part of the intended output from day one."

Miller says the process of taking a property or film and adapting it into book form is different for each title. In the best-case scenario, scripts and treatments from the film's production are still available, making these a straight reworking of the movie's screenplay.

"Other times," Miller explains, "the films are older, or more obscure, and there are little to no elements left to serve as a foundation, so our authors have to watch the films on a loop, tak-

ing notes, adding material where they can. The process varies, but it's always fun to receive an early draft of a script, because then the readers can be treated to alternate versions of some of their favourite movies. For example, in our Blue Sunshine reprint, [writer Ken Johnsonl was working from a script that was originally set in New York – the film takes place in California because that was one of the stipulations of the financing. But before the film received its budget, it was written to take place in New York."

As of this writing, the company has several

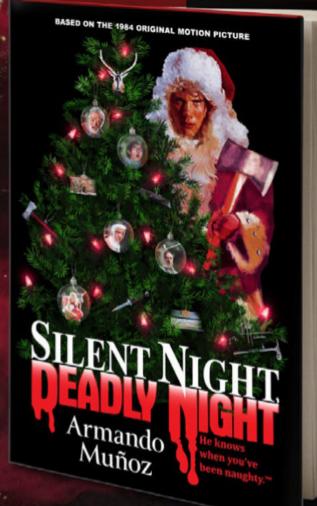
new novelizations on the way, including some essential titles from the likes of Yuzna and fellow horror auteur Vincenzo Natali.

"We're currently digitizing *Squirm*, and we hope to have new novelizations of *The Amityville Murders* and *Sleepaway Camp* to share with the world by the end of 2024," reveals Miller. "It's a dream job, and I look forward to all the titles, projects, and collaborations yet to come. As long as people keep reading, we'll keep making more books!"

STOP THE KILLER

Launched in 2022 by filmmaker Anthony Masi, Stop The Killer has released tabletop games and novelizations for early '80s cult slashers *My Bloody Valentine* and *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, with both a book and card game for 1981's *Happy Birthday to Me* slated for release this May. But Masi, who has co-written and produced such documentaries as *Halloween: 25 Years of Terror* and *His Name was Jason: 30 Years of Friday the 13th*, did not initially set out to become a book publisher.

"Stop The Killer's first board game was based on 1984's *Silent Night, Deadly Night* and I was very closely in touch with the licensors of that film because I am one of the producers of a remake of the movie that's been in development for a few years," he says. "One day I had suggested to the licensor that a novel based on the



original film could potentially help promote the remake, and I recommended that my friend, Armando Muñoz, write it. I read his novel *Hoarder* and thought he would be perfect to write the tie-in novel. Stop The Killer wasn't a book publisher — in fact, it wasn't even a gaming company when the *Silent Night, Deadly Night* board game was being created. The game was supposed to be a one-off project in partnership with Fright Rags, to create a game based on the film to keep the title in the zeitgeist while we were working to reboot the franchise with the remake."

Masi contacted Titan Books to broker a deal for the *Silent Night, Deadly Night* novelization, and received interest in putting it on shelves to coin-

cide with the remake's release date. When the remake was placed on hold, the publisher decided to pause the book project as well, but the board game went ahead and saw terrific success, prompting Masi to reach out to Fright Rags for another holiday horror collab.

"I was able to secure the rights to 1981's My Bloody Valentine, and that's when the idea to create a gaming company was born," he says. "I formed a company called Stop The Killer Games, and

during all this excitement I suggested to MBV licensor [Cinépix] that we could do a book for that film as well, with Armando as the writer."

Released in February 2023, the *My Bloody Valentine* novel and game were a hit for the company. The hardcover book – featuring beautiful retro dust jacket cover art courtesy of former *Rue Morgue* Art Director Gary Pullin – looked very much like something Doubleday would have published back in 1981 and sold out immediately. An instant collectible, copies now sell on eBay for hundreds of dollars apiece. Following the *My Bloody Valentine* project, Masi decided to resurrect his idea of adapting the controversial killerin-a-Santa-suit flick into book form.

"After the success of My Bloody Valentine, I took the opportunity to publish the Silent Night,

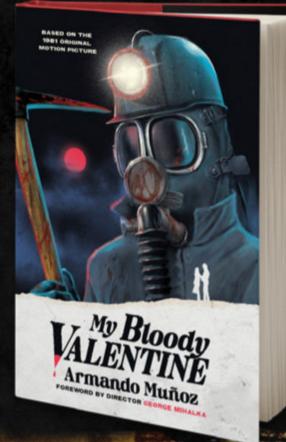
Deadly Night tie-in through Stop The Killer, and the pre-orders proved again that there was a market for this type of book," says Masi. "Looking back, I'm happy that Titan didn't run with the title because through my company I believe Armando had much more freedom to write the book he really wanted to write. There's a banner on the back of the dust jacket that says, 'Warning: This Book is Shocking!' and you'll have to read it to understand why!"

Released this past December, the *Silent Night* novelization has also since sold out, but Masi has plans to reissue both it and *My Bloody Valentine* in paperback, and, pending licensor approval, in ebook and audiobook formats. And fans of Frank Henenlotter's 1982 cult classic *Basket Case* will be happy to learn that the company is releasing a novelization this coming October.

VINEGAR SYNDROME PUBLISHING

Established in 2012, the independent home video company has been at the forefront of film preservation and restoration and boasts a catalogue of hundreds of films from the 1960s through to '90s — mostly in the vintage adult, horror, cult action, and exploitation genres. Recently, the company launched a publishing arm, Vinegar Syndrome Publishing, with the objective of releasing comics, novelizations, and coffee-table books of films from its catalogue. Its first releases were bloodsoaked comic book adaptations of Lucio Fulci's *Zombie* and William Lustig's *Maniac*.

"Last year I received an email from one of my favourite comic companies, Eibon Press," recalls Justin Tsantsa, Director of Publishing at Vinegar Syndrome. "Thinking it was going to be good news, I was super stoked to read it. However, it was an email stating they could no longer keep their proverbial doors open and the last issues we were getting were going to be just that - the last ones. So I had an idea that maybe we could work something out and take on their company and keep things rolling. Many meetings and phone calls later, we obtained Eibon Press and its creative guy, [co-founder] Stephen Romano. We plan on releasing their entire catalogue with all new extras, updated stories, new covers, our special box set treatment, and more."



THINK MOVIE NOVELIZATIONS ARE MERE REWORKINGS OF DUSTY OLD SCREENPLAYS? THINK AGAIN!

WICKED WORDSMITHS

BY JAMES BURRELL

RITING A NOVELIZATION OF A HORROR MOVIE – EVEN A GREAT ONE – IS NO EASY TASK. IT TAKES SKILL TO TRANSFORM A

90-page script into a full-length novel, and being a diehard slasher fan is not enough. Just ask *Rue Morgue* scribe Michael Gingold and Armando Muñoz, two authors who navigated the unique challenges of adapting a film to book form to create literary versions of our favourite cult horror flicks.

"I had always wanted to try my hand at writing a novelization, having been a fan and collector of them for so long," says Gingold, who penned the adaptation of the ultra-violent 1981 "Video Nasty" *Nightmare* for home video distributor Severin Films. The label has also released novels for the gory, penis-ripping Bigfoot flick *Night of the Demon* (1980) and the New Orleans-set 1978 slasher *Mardi Gras Massacre* (both written by Brad Carter).

"When Severin started publishing them, I was

already working with them, creating special features for their Blurays, so I asked [co-founder] David Gregory if I could take a shot at writing a future tie-in book," Gingold explains. "I knew they were working on putting *Night of the Demon* out on Blu-ray, so I pitched a novelization of that one, and he told me that was already in the works! Then he asked me if I'd like to tackle *Nightmare*, and I jumped at the opportunity."

Muñoz, who has penned novelizations of *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, and Canuck classics *My Bloody Valentine* and *Happy Birthday to Me* for game and book

publisher Stop The Killer already had several books under his belt. Among them were original takes on the slasher subgenre *Turkey Day* and *Turkey Kitchen*

"[Stop The Killer owner] Anthony Masi came to me after reading my earlier work," Muñoz says. "Silent Night, Deadly Night was the first film we discussed novelizing, but My Bloody Valentine was completed first to have the book ready for its early 2023 release in time for Valentine's Day." The recipient of numerous MPAA-mandated edits, the theatrical cut of *My Bloody Valentine* was missing much of the blood and gore that director George Mihalka had shot. Muñoz seized the opportunity to reinstate those scenes that had been sliced by the ratings board. To that end, he spoke extensively with Mihalka to reclaim his original vision for the page.

"The script for *My Bloody Valentine* had dozens of missing and extended scenes, along with some restructuring," Muñoz recalls. "I worked most of those scenes back in, including the infamous double murder scene which George insists was filmed, but the footage has yet to be found. He gave me a shot-for-shot breakdown. This is a much bloodier *Valentine* than the studio or rating board would allow in 1981."

Alas, turning scripts into novels isn't without its unique challenges as well: even if screenplays are available as source material, most of them aren't long enough to make a book-length project. And then there's the question of the content itself.

"It was fairly challenging to expand Nightmare into book form because it is, let's just say, not very heavy on plot or character depth," says Gingold. "Unfortunately, we weren't able to get ahold of a shooting script for me to draw from, but I also worked on some of the extras for Severin's Nightmare Blu-ray, for which they provided me with photos from a few deleted scenes. I also found an interview with [director] Romano Scavolini in which he talked about a couple of those scenes, so I was able to work

them into the novel."

Fortunately for all involved, Gingold had put together a locations featurette for *Nightmare* which brought him to the film's locations in Florida; having that familiarity was an immense help with the details and descriptions for parts of the story.

"For the most part, though," he says, "the challenge was to flesh out the characters in ways that both made sense and stayed true to what takes place in the movie, while making sure it worked as a scary and occasionally sleazy com-

panion piece to the film."

Muñoz faced similar obstacles with *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, which posed a challenge of preserving sympathy for a protagonist who becomes the antagonist. His strategy was to avoid approaching the book as a typical slasher narrative, and rather as an intimate character study. Because the film also jumps years and then a decade ahead, he took advantage of the massive gaps in Billy's story to fill in new details. As for *Happy Birthday to Me*, that posed a slightly different though no less difficult challenge.

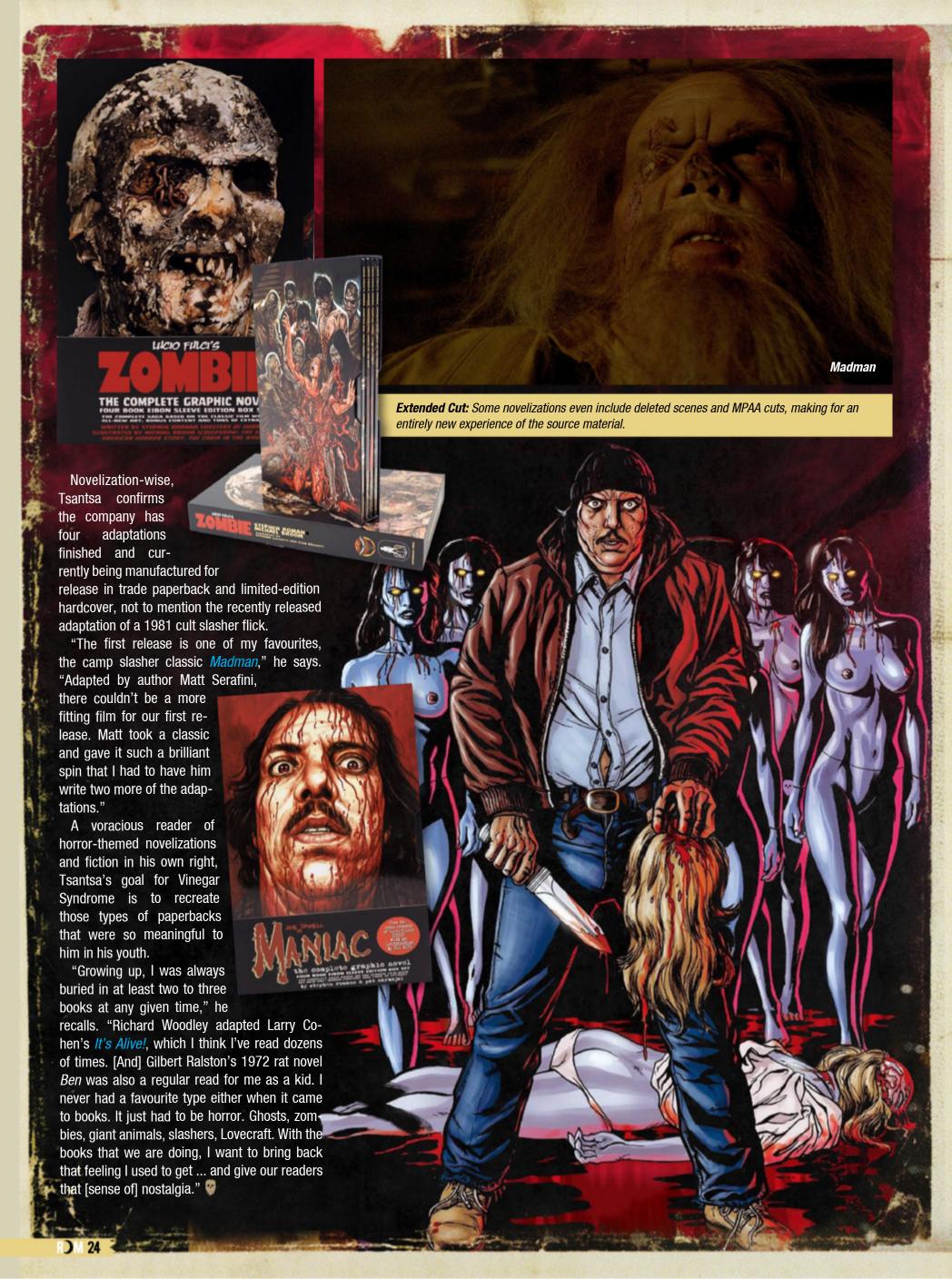
"Happy Birthday to Me was structurally complex because it has an unreliable narrator," he reveals. "The identity-swapping madness of the movie created unique challenges on the page. Also, the film Happy Birthday to Me was subjected to radical reshoots and restructuring, and some of the pieces don't fit, while other pieces are missing entirely."

Although novelizations are routinely denounced by critics as a lesser form of literature and often regarded as little more than a piece of promotional material for a film, Gingold notes the enthusiasm and appreciation for this type of fiction that's evidenced by its current resurgence in horror.

"I think whenever one art form is derived from another, there's often a sense that the second one is the lesser product," he observes, citing Jeff Rovin's adaptation for 1986's *April Fool's*

Day as one of his favourites. "How many times have movies been based on novels and people say, 'The book was better'? I believe there has long been a sense that novelizations don't take a lot of work, and certainly not a lot of imagination: the author is just duplicating the story and characters someone else came up with. Obviously, there are examples that prove this idea wrong, and I think with the trend of new novelizations, horror fans at least feel more respect for the form. And having written one myself, I can tell you that turning a 99-minute movie into a 193-page book ain't as easy as it might seem!" "





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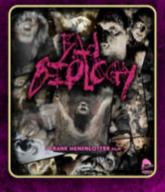
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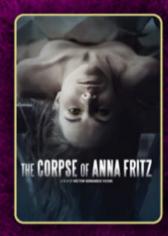
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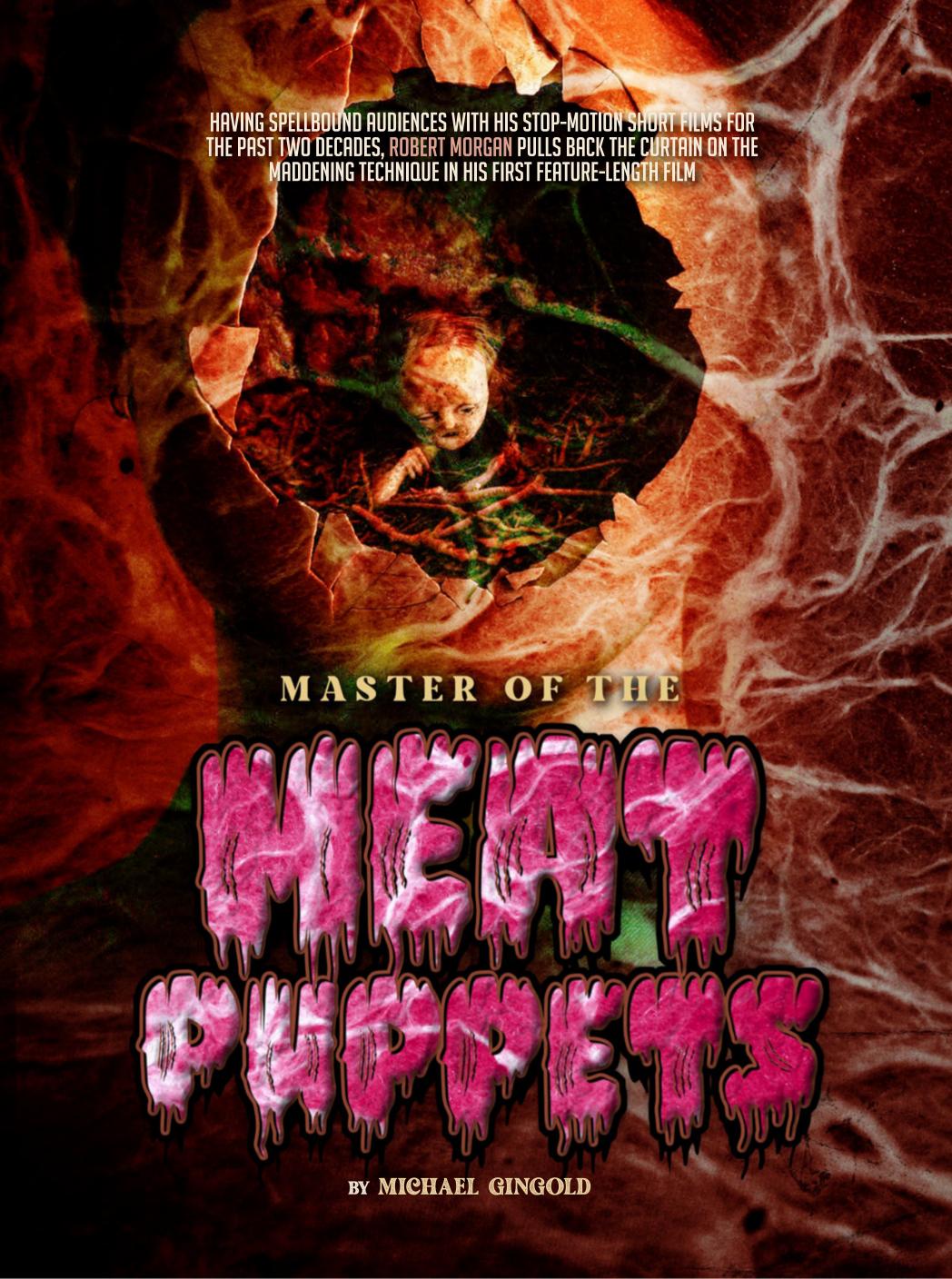
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hroughout its history, stop-motion animation has largely been associated with the fantastical, bringing to life such beasts as Willis O'Brien's King Kong and the many prehistoric and mythical beings of Ray Harryhausen. One of the foremost modern practitioners of the scary side of the medium has been British filmmaker Robert Morgan, whose formative childhood was altered indelibly by the stop-motion human brains featured in the low-budget 1958 fright flick Fiend Without a Face. Inspired by the unsettling jerkiness and hyper-realistic texture of the method, Morgan has since built his own monster gallery of stop-motion short films that are far ghastlier than what his predecessors might have ever envisioned [see RM#51 and sidebar]. The latest entry to his nightmarish filmography, however, is a full-length feature that combines terrifying stop-motion sequences with a twisted tale about the medium itself.

"I actually find the process of stop-motion animation fascinating, and I had never seen it depicted in a film before as something people do for a living," he explains. "And I felt that making a movie about that process that was also a hallucinatory psychological horror film would allow me to use stop-motion in an organic way, and would very naturally lend itself to mixing live action with animation. That excited me, because it's a bit of an under-explored area."

Stop-motion enthusiasts will be doubly dazzled by *Stopmotion*, now out in theatres and coming to VOD March 15 from IFC Films. Not only does the film contain some truly unsettling scenes involving puppets made of literal flesh, but also a rare peek behind the scenes at what it takes to craft these painstakingly precise sequences... and the price of that talent to a deeply troubled mind.

As the movie opens, animator Ella (Aisling Franciosi from The Last Voyage of the Demeter) functions essentially as an extension of her mother Suzanne (Stella Gonet), a once-celebrated animator herself, rendered unable to work by arthritis, who uses her daughter's hands to complete her last film. Nicknaming her daughter "puppet" and hovering over her every shot, Suzanne's overbearing care requirements keep Ella at a distance from both her craft and her boyfriend (Tom York). When Suzanne is suddenly hospitalized, Ella is free to pursue her own vision, but finds herself uninspired until she meets a little girl (Caoilinn Springall) with a very dark imagination. Teaching the girl the ins and outs of the medium, from construction of the figures to technique and movement, Ella's protege quickly develops a knack for the macabre, spinning a tale of a terrified girl stalked by a hideous "Ash Man." As the art improves, the artist deteriorates, and Ella soon finds herself unable to discern her own horror story from the one she's animating. Thus, the Ash Man starts to haunt her waking hours, sending her deeper into a hallucinatory tailspin



Eerie Effigy: Freed to make her own films but hampered by personal demons, Ella (Aisling Franciosi) comes to resemble the monsters of her own dark imagination.

into the same nightmare world her characters inhabit, and culminating in a body count.

It's tempting to assume that a stop-motion

animator making a film about a stop-motion animator means it would be at least somewhat autobiographical. But while Morgan (who co-wrote the story with actor/filmmaker Robin King) never quite lost his grip on reality like Ella, he does allow that sometimes his art takes over, citing his much-lauded 2011 short Bobby Yeah.

"The idea of somebody making an animated film where the puppets feel like they have their own inner life, separate from what that person is giving them, was something I went through

on *Bobby Yeah*," he says. "That was improvised from start to finish. I had a vague idea where I was going, but I was letting it tell me what it

wanted to be, and it went off in directions I would never have imagined. It took on a life of its own. I still don't really know where that came from,

and it was exciting creatively, but also a little bit unnerving."

That's not to say he's entirely written himself into *Stopmotion*'s twisted story. Just as Morgan understood that animators and SFX creators were often unsung heroes of our favourite fright fare, this is doubly true for this particular style of animation.

"There are a lot of amazing women stop-motion filmmakers who I've been influenced by to an extent," he allows. "At the same time, given where the story and the char-

acter of Ella go, I felt that having a female lead made it feel a bit more fresh and original."

While it's true that there has been a mini-trend



recently of UK psychological horror films dealing with severely troubled women, including Rose Glass' *Saint Maud* and especially Prano Bailey-Bond's *Censor*, which also takes place in a filmmaking milieu, Morgan notes that *Stopmotion* was in the works long before those movies emerged.

"The concept for this film, and the treatment and everything we prepared, happened a decade ago," he reveals. "It took about five years to write it, because Robin and I were both doing other things, and then another five years to get the financing, since the pandemic happened in the middle of all that as well. Saint Maud came out in that time, and we were going into pre-production, I believe, around the time Censor began playing. There must have been something in the air several years ago that we were all kind of drawing on, and these three films would make a good, weird little triple bill."

Keeping the story fresh and unique is the inclusion of Ella's muse: the unnamed little girl whose twisted imagination and ability to nudge Ella toward the brink of insanity make her the film's most intriguing mystery. It is the girl who suggests Ella's film be a scary one, and that she use very unconventional (and decidedly un-vegan) materials to flesh out her puppets (pun intended)... if she's even a girl at all.

"Robin and I just felt that if you watch the film and think about it afterward, given how and

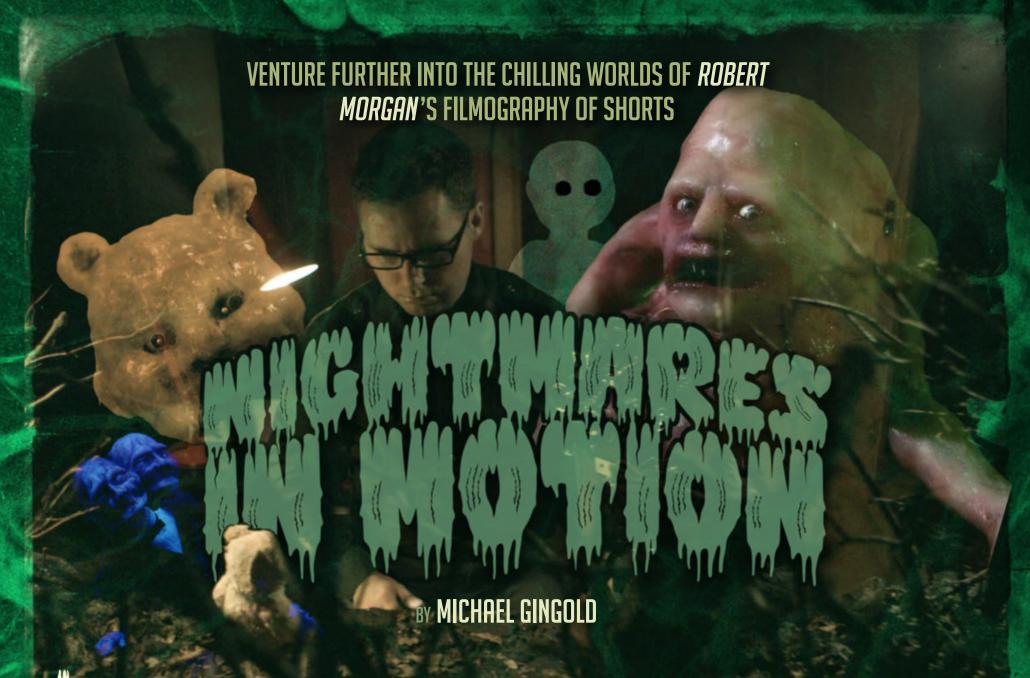
when this girl comes into the story and her function within it, it's very clear what she is," says Morgan. "And if we just put in a big twist and reveal, it would be like, 'Well, we already know that.' People who've seen the movie do generally understand instinctively who she is. Some people have also come up with very different interpretations, and I actually like the fact that it's quite open that way. That was a very deliberate approach that we took across the board. We removed some information at the script level, and when we were editing, we removed even more and tried to keep it as elliptical as possible. There are many parts of the film where you have to kind of join the dots a little bit."

And that includes their presentation of the film's eponymous technique itself. As a lifetime acolyte of the process, Morgan sought to give audiences a peek behind the curtain at this painstakingly precise form of filmmaking.

"Stop-motion is a very mysterious process," he says, "and within the film, we tried to add a subtle subtext, or almost a religious dimension, to it. Ella and her mother wear these gowns that feel slightly ceremonial, and there's a lot of religious music in the film and an element of martyrdom, and the sense of summoning forces through the animation of their characters. It's all very much buried in the background, but it's there. For me, it was about showing that stop-motion is a strange, ritualistic process. Because I think it is, you know, a very weird thing to do."

And in this screen vehicle, it's complemented by the makeup effects of Dan Martin, the British artist who has become one of the field's most valuable contemporary players. He's a frequent collaborator with Ben Wheatley, Brandon Cronenberg, and others, and one of his films with the latter led Morgan to realize he was a kindred spirit.

"It was after I saw *Possessor* that I realized Dan was the right guy for *Stopmotion*," he says, "because of the weird stuff he did with wax and the almost experimental approach to the special effects. It's not too slick; his stuff is a bit rough around the edges, which I mean as a compliment. That's what I really like about his work. That slightly rougher aesthetic is what I was trying to get, and Dan's great at that, so he made the puppets and the Ash Man suit, and did all the gore as well. It was great fun to work with him."



F YOU'VE FREQUENTED FESTIVALS OF THE FRIGHTENING AND FANTASTIC OVER THE LAST COUPLE OF DECADES,

"you've likely encountered the uniquely unsettling works of Robert Morgan. If you haven't, *Stopmotion* opens a window into his world of strange and surreal puppet animation, and will leave you wanting to experience more.

Once seen, Morgan's particular style becomes instantly recognizable: waxy figures with unnervingly expressive eyes and orifices like wounds, and an emphasis on fleshy, grotesque acts of creation/birth, penetration, transformation, and travesties of human and animal forms. His animated shorts rarely have any comprehensible dialogue, filling your eyes instead with sights that dare you to watch

yet make it impossible to look away.

Morgan's technique is rough in his 1994 student short *Paranoid*, yet the seeds of his obsessions had clearly taken root. He truly announced himself with 1997's *The Man in the Lower-Left Hand Corner of the Photograph*, a study of isolation and longing that leads to a resolution combining transcendence with the gruesomely visceral. It won him his first festival award and revealed his ability to breathe life, and inner lives, into figures with extreme emotional states and the qhastliest of situations.

Morgan followed up with The

Cat With Hands (2001), a dark fable putting a gruesome spin on an old saying about felines. The filmmaker here mixes stop-motion with live action, though the forest set where his two-person cast performs resembles the woodsy realms of his fully animated work (including the films-within-the-film in Stopmotion). Next was 2003's The Separation, which took home over a dozen awards; it starts with a conjoined couple, though you know from the title they won't be together for long, leading to transfixingly macabre developments. It's no wonder that fourteen years lat-

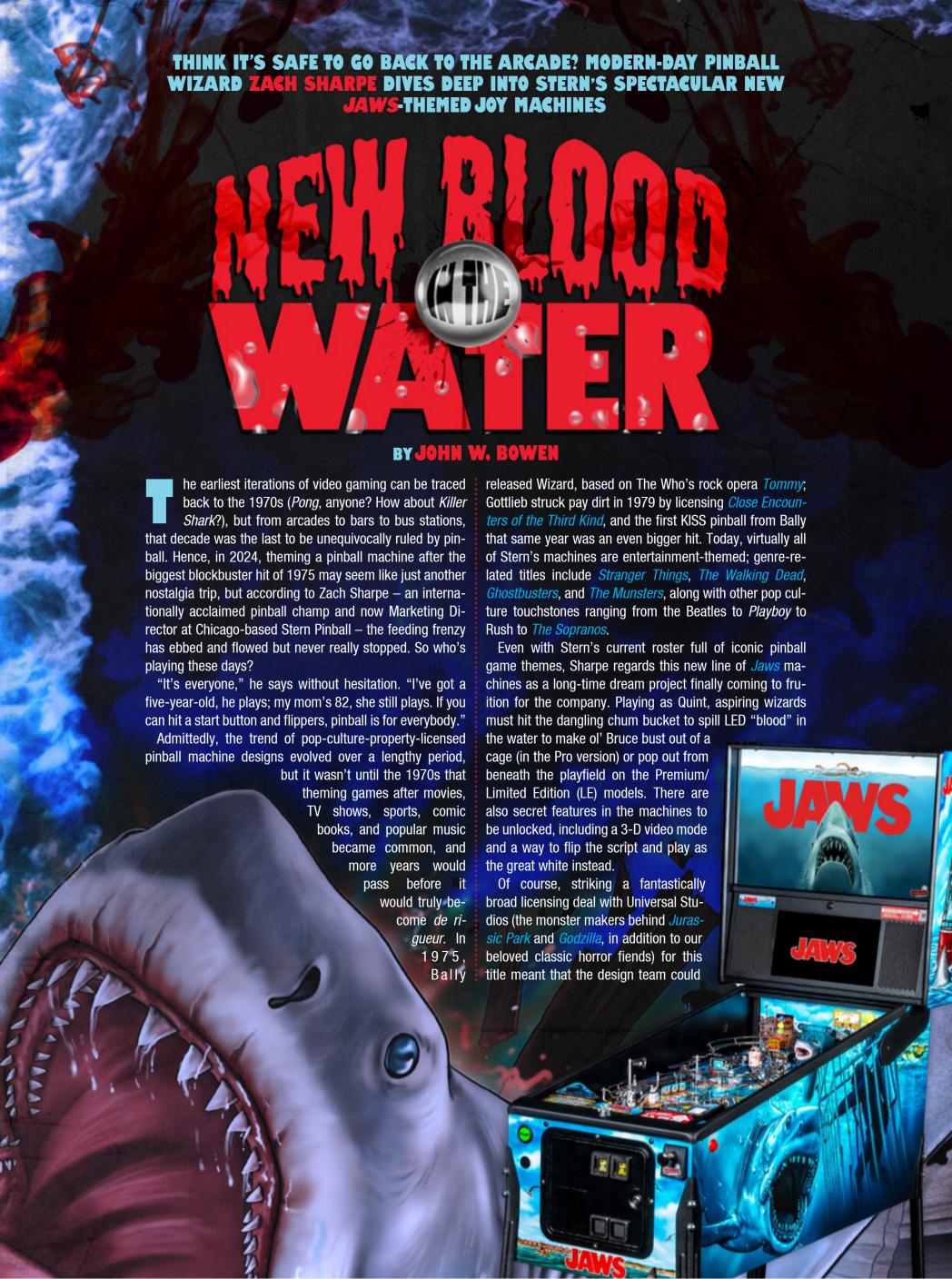
er, Arrow Films commissioned Morgan to contribute the short *Belial's Dream* to their Blu-ray of *Basket Case*; there was no one better to imagine what Frank Henenlotter's misshapen Siamese-twin anti-hero might have nightmares about.

Morgan ventured into full live action with *Monsters* (2004), with his preoccupations nonetheless intact as a young boy becomes fixated on a severed goose head he finds in the backyard, leading him to foster horrific fantasies. The filmmaker unleashed his magnum opus in 2011: the much-lauded *Bobby Yeah*, in which the

rabbit-eared title character steals a larva from its home, setting off a series of monstrous encounters and environmental changes. Morgan recalls in the accompanying interview that he essentially made up *Bobby Yeah* as he went along, and you can indeed feel him letting loose his full, unfettered, aggressively twisted imagination over the course of *Bobby Yeah*'s 23 minutes.

The live action/puppet animation combo Invocation, from 2013, is a direct precursor to Stopmotion as an animator (played by Robin King, who would go on to co-script that feature) finds the tools of his craft turning on him in nasty, fleshy ways. As his reputation grew, Morgan would be commissioned to bring his morbidly accomplished talents to other showcases, contributing the ultimate bug nightmare D is for Deloused to the 2014 anthology feature ABCs of Death 2 and Tomorrow I Will Be Dirt: Scenes from the Afterlife of Lothar Schramm to Arrow's 2019 Blu-ray of Jörg Buttgereit's *Schramm*. Once again, Morgan proved the perfect choice to animate the torments visited upon the titular serial killer in the world beyond ours.

Morgan tells *Rue Morgue* that he's currently working on a new feature that will incorporate practical effects, but not stop-motion — still, it's hard to imagine he'll eschew the form that cemented his special place in the genre for long. In the meantime, you can view most of the works covered here over on his YouTube channel: @MrMorgansOrgans.



really pull out all stops, effectively – in the film's parlance – "serving up a smorgasbord."

"Universal gave us access to all four films," says Sharpe. "We got all the assets for this game. We could use any clips, sounds, visuals. And what's really cool is we have custom speech by Richard Dreyfuss that we incorporated and John Williams' famous score."

Dreyfuss is the only surviving member of the original film's trio of unlikely, bickering heroes – Robert Shaw and Roy Scheider died in 1978 and 2008, respectively – so Sharpe regards his participation on this line as the cherry on the chum bucket.

"It was pretty special," he recalls, "working directly with his management, recording him in the studio, and watching him getting into his Hooper state of mind to make all these pinball-centric callouts."

Due to contractual complications, the likeness of Scheider – who played Amity Island's likeable, thalassophobic everyman cop Martin Brody – is conspicuously absent from the machine's surface graphics, but Sharpe assures us he's as present as his fishing buds in the game's whistles, bells, and bites.

"Every licensing agreement is different for audiovisual rights," says Sharpe, "but he is in the game. When you play it, you're going to see his face, you'll hear 'Smile, you sonofabitch!' You won't see his face in the [graphic] artwork but you do see the back of his head in the Premium [edition] artwork, on the Orca as it's sinking."

Stern's *Jaws* game — which premiered at the CES tech expo in Las Vegas last January and is already shipping worldwide — is available in three iterations: Pro, Premium, and LE, limited to a thousand units worldwide. When asked which market segment each version is geared toward and why, Sharpe admits it's not easy to quantify.

"It's all blurred," he says. "There are some locations that, ironically, only carry Limited Editions and that's kind of their marquee. Premium, you can find anywhere; it has the same bells and whistles, it's just not limited in nature. And Pro is what you would see at [commercial] locations, because there are less moving parts, it needs a little less maintenance and it's more affordable. But again, there's no one-size-fits-all with pinball collectors and enthusiasts."

Of course, there's more than just an apex predator lurking below the waterline — all three editions are equipped with Stern's own Insider Connected system which expands the experience. By scanning a QR code, players can search for the nearest Stern machines, track their stats, and see where they rank on a global network.

"It's similar to Xbox Live but for pinball," explains Sharpe. "It helps you earn achievements, keeps track of your scores, we do fun monthly quests, you can compete in leaderboards and compete with people in the community. And that's just from a consumer perspective; from the operator perspective, it pretty much makes



Shark Attack: In addition to licensed **Jaws** art and action, Stern machines are equipped with the Insider Connected System so players can compete worldwide.

the pinball machine smart. There are tech alerts, diagnostics of what's going on with your machine. If you need service, you get an alert, 'Oh the coin door's open, that's not good.'"

While other big names from pinball's heyday such as Bally and Gottlieb have all but faded from the gaming public's consciousness, Stern's commitment to combining popular themes with new technologies — and a general absence of real competition — sees them garnering, in Sharpe's estimation, "a 90 percent market share." Still, even being the biggest fish in the pond doesn't mean every licensing deal is going to be a gimme. Sharpe stresses that the waters can still be tricky to navigate.

"In terms of a pinball licensing perspective, usually we'll have that first right of refusal," he elaborates, "but the landscape of gaming in general is so massive that there's never really truly exclusive rights. Sometimes with a property they might not want so many people using their IP. So, it's all one-on-ones and you just don't know until you communicate

with a licenser. Every license is different and this one took years. But it was a dream of ours, so it was like catching the shark. It took some years but when we got it, we got the big one."

When pressed about other iconic horror movie or TV show-themed games Stern is hoping to spring on us in the near or distant future, Sharpe becomes understandably (and rather apologetically) guarded.

"We might be working on it now," he says with a laugh, "so there are things we can't disclose. But I like to use the analogy of a restaurant: we don't just serve steaks, we have different options. And with our [game] theme choices, it runs the gamut. [That's why] we're always stay-

ing abreast of pop culture to do current things like *Stranger Things*, but also diversifying and doing timeless things like *Star Wars*, *James Bond*, or *Jaws*. So, you never know what's around the corner."

Or, one surmises, circling slowly just below the surface...



SATAN IN REAL TIME

LATE NIGHT WITH THE DEVIL

Starring David Dastmalchian, Laura Gordon and Ian Bliss Written and directed by Colin and Cameron Cairnes IFC Films/Shudder

David Dastmalchian, who's been all over the genre scene during the past year in supporting

roles (The Last Voyage of the Demeter, The Boogeyman, Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania), gets to take centre stage in Late Night With the Devil. And it provides him a hell of a showcase, casting him as talkshow host Jack Delroy, trying to drum up much-needed ratings with a 1977 Halloween-night episode that goes awry in both frightening and raucously entertaining ways.

Australian writer/directors Colin and Cameron Cairnes nail all the American pop-culture details here, beginning

with a perfectly pitched overview of Jack's career. Things aren't going well for him personally or professionally when he decides to host a paranormally themed show, in which guests include a dubious mentalist (Fayssal Bazzi), an occult

debunker (lan Bliss), and a psychiatrist (Laura Gordon) with her young teenage patient Lilly (Ingrid Torelli), recently rescued from a satanic cult. Each has been given amusing character quirks and/or well-developed conflicts, and there's a nervous undertone to the humour in the movie's first half. Then things get serious as it becomes clear Lilly still has a bit of the devil in her; Torelli brings shivery intimations of occult intrusions to

come with simple bits of body language and meaningfully timed smiles, signposting an explosion of the supernatural in the last act.

Alternating between the program that '77 viewers allegedly saw and offscreen goings-on they didn't, the Cairneses keep you believing that this is an actual relic of TV's past, and in the increasing desperation of those putting it on, Dastmalchian keeps us sympathizing with Jack as the show spirals way out of his control. While the symptoms of Lilly's posses-

sion are familiar, the writer/directors take the curse off that by staging them in a milieu where they're just what the other characters are expecting, and in a few cases hoping, to see. And as this *Late Night* goes on, the filmmakers take

their visual horrors in fresh and powerful directions, making this must-see TV best viewed, if possible, on the big screen.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

THE TRAILER PARK JAILER

YOU'LL NEVER FIND ME

Starring Brendan Rock, Jordan Cowan and Elena Carapetis Directed by Josiah Allen and Indianna Bell Written by Indianna Bell Shudder

Permit me a preamble, but *Barbarian* fucking sucks. Not just because it's a string of non-sequiturs barely held together by ohshit-that-was-so-crazy lulz or due to its embarrassingly race-blind portrayal of suburban Detroit as only the whitest kid you know could



come up with, but because writer/director Zach Cregger has readily admitted that the seed for his 2022 hit was feminine hypervigilance of a sort he has no way of accessing and (more unforgivably) no interest in exploring or learning about in any depth beyond its use as misdirec-

tion. To her credit, writer/director Indianna Bell (in concert with co-director Josiah Allen) roots *You'll Never Find Me* in this same base of womanly fear with lived experience and nuance, but the last act turns similarly and unexpectedly retrograde.

The Australian feature concerns Patrick (Brendan Rock), a strange man living in isolation in a trailer park who welcomes in a young woman (Jordan Cowan) seeking shelter from a violent storm. Though she's on high alert, the lonely Patrick is reticent to let her leave, ostensibly concerned for her safety but obviously enjoying the opportunity to share his haunted past with his captive audience of one. But as the storm rages and truths begin to unspool, it becomes increasingly unclear who should be afraid of whom.

The first-time feature directors make fine use of close quarters and a limited cast to create real tension from moment one, but without tonal peaks and troughs the grimly consistent tone quickly becomes soporific, with everything from the storm to a bubbling tomato soup to a postback earring or packet of crisps treated with the same low buzz of dreadful thematic weight. Things do perk up in the clamorous final minutes, but the Maniac-style conclusion (Spinell or Wood, take your pick) is an ugly and unclear coda for a film that feels like it wants to say something of import about the need for women to stay hypervigilant in a dangerous world... but spuriously leaves piles of female corpses to do all the talking.

ROCCO T. THOMPSON

HAMMERTIME

DOCTOR JEKYLL

Starring Eddie Izzard, Scott Chambers and Lindsay Duncan Directed by Joe Stephenson Written by Dan Kelly-Mulhern Hammer Films

Hammer's *Doctor Jekyll* is neither an adaptation of R.L. Stevenson's classic novella, nor is it a radical reimagining; hell, despite its present-day setting it's not even an "update" per se. Rather, it's another look





at some of the original tale's classic themes – humanity's dual nature, temptation and consequence – intertwined with some discomforting questions about whether everyone really does have a price.

Scott Chambers is note-perfect as Rob Stevenson (nyuk-nyuk), a likeable if unsophisticated recently paroled recovering drug addict, who takes a job as caregiver for frail, reclusive Dr. Nina Jekyll (Eddie Izzard), a wealthy and once-revered scientist (and granddaughter of You-Know-Who) who has fallen from grace with the medical establishment. Jekyll's brittle assistant Sandra (Lindsay Duncan) takes an immediate disliking to Rob, but Jekyll herself cautiously warms to him. Between their respective miseries and mutual annoyance with Sandra, Rob and Jekyll soon kindle an odd friendship, but as they rattle around the cavernous mansion, Rob becomes increasingly suspicious that the good doctor may have nefarious plans for him.

Izzard is in rare form here, wonderfully arch without ever resorting to caricature – damn close, right up to the edge, but never quite cross-

ing that fatal line. I can even forgive a final act that goes a little too far to tie up all the loose ends. (Certain reviewers at this fine publication tend to look more indulgently upon that kind of thing than I do, but this time I'll climb aboard with them and enjoy the ride.) Perhaps best of all — at least where you faithful Hammerheads are concerned — *Doctor Jekyll* serves notice that Hammer, one of horror cinema's

grand old dames, remains in touch with her roots without being enslaved by them; bringing on the gothic goodies without embarrassing herself in a desperate bid to channel past glories.

JOHN W. BOWEN

HEEERE'S RONNIE!

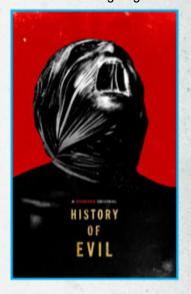
HISTORY OF EVIL

Starring Paul Wesley, Jackie Cruz and Rhonda Johnson Dents Written and directed by Bo Mirhosseni Shudder

As America plunges headlong into another contentious, historic presidential election cycle, one need not be a glass-half-empty type to hear the premise of *History of Evil* — wherein the United States, plagued by civil war, becomes a neo-facist state run by God-fearing, gun-toting militias — to think "Yeah, that could absolutely happen." This world state is an intriguing

backdrop for a haunted house story, but while it's clear that writer/director Bo Mirhosseni wants to examine the ways in which the past continues to plague the present, his horror feature debut suffers from both a lack of character development and supernatural scares.

After she is smuggled out of prison, resistance







OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE THROWS DOWN SOME RHYMES

ITS FLEECE WAS RED AS BLOOD



MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB

Uncork'd Entertainment

The new craze for 2024 is apparently horror movies centred around our most cherished childhood joints. Winnie the Pooh, Tigger, and even Mickey Mouse circa *Steamboat Willie* are all getting their kill on as I write this, so it's high time we featured nursery rhyme horror movies in this column! Based on the nursery rhyme of the same name, *Mary*

Had a Little Lamb gets an update from the crew of a true-crime podcast after they get lost in the woods while investigating a spate of missing teens. Things get hairy when they find a house inhabited by an old lady and her disfigured son, who dons a lamb's head to visit the truest crime upon those unsuspecting podcasters. This little lamb might have had fleece as white as snow, but it's soon drenched in blood once the hacking and slashing begins. What can I say, this one is better than it had any right to be! Who knew Mary's lamb was so deranged?

BODY COUNT: 5

DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you hear a lamb growl

SEE HOW THEY RUN



THREE BLIND MICE

Uncork'd Entertainment

Abigail has a pretty bad drug problem and is dragged, kicking and screaming, to a cabin in the woods for an intervention. Her family might have good intentions, but what they don't realize is that there are monstrous killer mice lurking in a nearby bunker just waiting to nibble on any unwitting human who happens to stroll by, as revenge for all

the medical and scientific experiments that have been performed on their king. Based on a true story this ain't! Though it does showcase a few gruesome death scenes, *Three Blind Mice* loses sight (a pun!) on the brutal scenery-munching from two of the actresses who starred in the aforementioned *Little Lamb* flick. But what bugged me the most were the killer mice, which look like a trio of orcs who wandered over from a nearby *Lord of the Rings* convention. You'll wish you were blind by the end of this one!

BODY COUNT: 10

DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you hear a mouse growl

NOT RED ENOUGH



LITTLE DEAD ROTTING HOOD

The Asylum

With an epidemic of vicious wolf attacks plaguing his county, a local sheriff finds himself seriously wondering if they're of supernatural origin. So, he gathers his deputies and a posse of local yokels to battle werewolves, shape-shifters, and witches in an undying effort to get us to stomach this ridiculous storyline! Ludicrous from start to finish, *Little*

Dead Rotting Hood sees director Jared Cohn "updating" the fairy tale with gratuitous nudity and the worst CGI werewolf transformations known to humanity, before passing it through his colon into the hands of genre fans. Not even the appearance of some fairly competent names – like Eric Balfour (2003's Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Six Feet Under) and Marina Sirtis (Star Trek: TNG, The Grudge 3) – can save this from rotting in a delete bin for all eternity!

BODY COUNT: 16

DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you hear a wolf growl

LAST CHANCE LANCE

leader Alegre (Jackie Cruz) goes on the lam with her husband Ron (Paul Wesley, *The Vampire Diaries*), young daughter Daria (Murphee Bloom), and fellow resistance member Trudy (Rhonda Johnson Dents). They make their way past checkpoints and survey drones before holing up in an abandoned house deep in the woods to wait for safe extraction to the group's base camp. Trudy insists the house is the perfect place to hide, as "people are terrified of it." She doesn't elaborate on why this may be, but the boxes of KKK paraphernalia hint at the property's dark past. Ron eventually begins having late-night drinks, pie, and chats with the ghost of the house's former owner, who persuades him to do some very bad things to his fellow fugitives.

History of Evil tweaks many a beat from Kubrick's The Shining: a family trapped in an isolated location, a husband helped along to madness by a ghost who reminds him what a bitch his wife is, the wife who must save herself and her ghost-spotting child from her increasingly dangerous husband, and on and on. While it does hold a few narrative surprises in its final moments, the scant ghostly horror beats feel stale and too far between and the psychological elements, such as Ron's Jack Torrance-esque journey, aren't fleshed out enough to carry any terrifying weight.

STACIE PONDER

SHOULD HAVE BEEN AUDIBLE

MONOLITH

Starring Lily Sullivan Directed by Matt Vesely Written by Lucy Campbell Well Go USA

As far as feature directorial debuts go, *Monolith* is a bold, respectable swing. Whether or not that swing is successful, however, depends entirely on the attention span of the viewer.

Set within a single location and featuring only one onscreen actor (*Evil Dead Rise*'s Lily Sullivan), the film tells of a disgraced journalist reduced to podcasting about unsolved mysteries and hoaxes as she attempts to get back on her feet. After an anonymous tip slides into her inbox, she's thrust into a string of stories involving ominous black bricks and the people who receive them. Before she knows it, our hero is up to her neck in conspiracy theories (and Post-it notes) and must contend with the consequences of broadcasting her findings.

The choice to contain the story to a single location and one onscreen character leads to expected limitations in storytelling: much of the film consists of audio from phone calls and podcast recordings with occasional vague, dreamlike visual recreations of what's being described, leading the viewer to wonder



if film was the right medium for this particular tale. With minor tweaks, it could very well have made for

a successful scripted podcast or Audible Original title. *Monolith* is ploddingly paced, though Sullivan carries it strongly enough to maintain interest. Patient camerawork makes stimulating use of the overwhelmingly modern, brick-laden home in which it's set, and the film benefits from some interesting audio design choices.

That said, if viewers are easily distracted, they may find themselves scrolling on their phones before the story even gets a chance to get going. Frankly, the investment of time and attention may still not pay off for even the most staunchly attentive. While an intriguing mystery and clever metaphor lie in the centre of this film, it takes a lot of digging to get there and still leaves a number of questions unanswered... much like its in-film podcast.

RICKY J. DUARTE

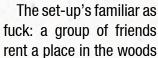
DEAD WOODS

STRANGER IN THE WOODS

Starring Holly Kenney, Brendin Brown and Paris Nicole Directed by Adam Newacheck Written by Holly Kenney Red Hound Films

We often hear uneducated audiences bemoaning "bad acting" in low-budget genre films when, as often as not, the actors are capable but the real problems began long before the cameras rolled. Would-be psychological thriller *Strang*-

er in the Woods is a prime example: very solid performers and crew doing their damnedest with a plodding, pedestrian, and ultimately nonsensical script (written, in this case, by lead actress Holly Kenney).



for a weekend getaway in the wake of a tragedy, in this case involving Olivia (Holly Kenney), who has attempted suicide (or was she attacked?) in the wake of her boyfriend's death. To stir the plot pot, they've rented their digs from Clayton (Teddy Spencer), the skeevy, socially awkward and (alarm bells!) taxidermy-obsessed brother of Olivia's best friend Sam (Brendin Brown). And Clayton doesn't like Olivia's dog, and we don't like that.

Now look, we're used to indulging some dumbass behaviour in horror movies involving teens or young adults in the woods, but there are certain lines I can no longer bring myself to cross. Specifically, Olivia spots a bear trap in a shallow hole in the woods and *doesn't* bother to tell anyone about it? I mean, even if you don't like your friends much, there's still the dog to consider, right? Then she tells her friends about the hole the next day but *doesn't* mention the

trap? And then the dog goes missing and we find out Clayton's even more demented and then there's what should be a big reveal and then another, except that the entire construction is too half-assed for even the most undemanding viewer to take any of it seriously. As critiques go, "Decent writing doesn't cost a cent" is, admittedly, a cliché; movies like *Stranger in the Woods* are the reason it's a cliché.

JOHN W. BOWEN

SORORITY SIN

SLOTHERHOUSE

Starring Lisa Ambalavanar, Sydney Craven and Olivia Rouyre Directed by Matthew Goodhue Written by Bradley Fowler and Cady Lanigan Gravitas Ventures/Hulu

Sorority houses make for well-trod grounds in horror. College gals just trying to get an education and have a good time have had to face off against Satanists, depraved slasher killers, ghosts, telekinetic teens, and more over the years. In *Slotherhouse*, these sorority sisters must survive against a foe that we never knew the genre needed: the three-toed sloth.

College senior Emily (Lisa Ambalavanar) is desperate to grow her social media profile and become sorority house president. After a quasi-meet-cute at the mall with a shady dealer of

exotic animals, Emily adopts a sloth (recently poached from Panama) in the hopes it'll turn the tide in her favour. It works, much to the consternation of house mean girl and current president Brianna (Sydney Craven, *Jeepers Creepers: Reborn*) and Emily's concerned bestie Maddie (Olivia Rouyre, *American Horror Stories*). But while all the sisters are "heart horny" over the adorable new mascot they name Alpha, the sloth has murder on her precious little mind.

Slotherhouse abides by the magic formula that was put forth to great effect by 2014's smash hit (to my mind, at least) Zombeavers:

take a supremely stupid premise, give it a script that's genuinely funny, hire actors who will treat it all very seriously, and utilize puppets instead of CGI. Slotherhouse takes this surefire approach even further by adding Big Ass Spiders! director Mike Mendez to the roster as editor, as well as composer Sam Ewing (The Walking Dead), whose shrieking strings call Friday the 13th to mind. While it's a shame that the absurd violence is more hinted at than shown, the cast

leans in so hard that it's all a delight nonetheless. (Surely Tiff Stevenson's turn as Ms. Mayflower deserves a spot in the Horror House Mother Hall of Fame next to Mrs. Mac of *Black Christmas*.)

Nothing in *Slotherhouse* is explained – including the decidedly un-sloth-like things that Alpha does – and that's just fine. It's a perfect party horror movie about a killer sloth that's more deadly and resilient than Michael Myers. What more could you ask for?

STACIE PONDER

FUTURE TENSE

RESTORE POINT

Starring Andrea Mohylová, Matej Hádek and Zdenek Jecelin Directed by Robert Hloz Written by Tomislav Čečka, Zdeněk Jecelín and Robert Hloz XYZ Films

Restore Point is a tightly plotted and smart thriller by first-time Czech director and co-writer Robert Hloz. Set not quite twenty years in the future, it draws on other mystery/sci-fi mash-ups such as *Minority Report*, but imbues its story with enough plot twists and emotional hooks to feel fresh.

The world of *Restore Point* is a central European country where the answer to violent crime is to provide the populous with a pocket-sized device that can "restore" them in the event of their

unexpected death — like a backup file. When Detective Em Trochinowska (Andrea Mohylová) is assigned to investigate a double murder, she soon realizes the murder is covering up something big, something involving the Restoration Institute itself. It turns out the Institute, a public service that offers restoration



services to all, is about to privatize, meaning the ability to be brought back will be available only to those who can afford it. To make matters weirder, the murder victims are David Kurlstat (Matej

Hádek), one of the heads of the Institute, and his wife Kristina, who may or may not have been tied into an anti-restoration resistance group called the River of Life.

Restore Point clips along at a brisk pace, moving from the rich, sterile confines of the Institute and its elite to a rough, countryside commune whose occupants believe death should be natural and permanent. Mohylová's performance as Trochinowska is what keeps Restore Point from becom-

ing an exercise in action and flashy future design; she's strong, believable, and empathetic. The entire cast is very good, but this is really Mohylová's movie, and she carries it beautifully.





ON THE SLAB: ANIMATED APPETIZERS

BUZZKILL

5:20 mins/YouTube via the Alter channel

Brooklyn-based animator Peter Ahern begins this story with the familiar scenario of Becky and Rick (voiced by Kelly McCormack and Ahern himself, respectively) about to get cozy after hitting it off on their first date. Before they can get down to business though, Becky retreats to her bathroom and things escalate for both of them as chilling discoveries are made. Ahern packs a lot into *Buzzkill*'s five-minute run time, pulling influences from such varied ti-

tles as *The Breakfast Club* and *Maniac*. Even more impressive is that Ahern used the slowdown of the pandemic to finally get his project underway, meaning he had to wear many more hats than he originally intended. The comedy and gross-out factor work in tandem to provide a deliciously visceral reaction, and one can't help envisioning what this situation would look like in live action.



SOMETHING IN THE GARDEN

6:08 mins/Vimeo via Marcos Sánchez's channel

In the midst of a dark and windy night, something blue and otherworldly prowls an overgrown, fenced-in yard in the suburbs. Next door, a curious teenager attempts to investigate. Santiago native Marcos Sánchez has created a piece of quiet dread that visually recalls the work of Charles Burns and Hayao Miyazaki. His background as a painter birthed a hybrid animation style that involves projecting black backgrounds onto walls; a technique that later evolved into his wonderful utilization of shadow in *Something in the Garden*, which Sanchez claims was inspired by Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter*. Complemented by Gonzalo Perez's sound design and a complete lack of dialogue, this short is as surreal as it is mysterious.

THE RATCATCHER'S DAUGHTER

16:44 mins/via Plex and Hoopla

Created as part of Lakeside Animation's recent anthology project *Red Iron Road*, this short is a marvel to behold. Based on Alexander Grin's short story "The Rat-Catcher," Jim Bryson and Adam Jeffcoat's segment is set in the oppressed village of 1920s Petrograd where the sweet and naive Nina (Christie Stewart) crosses paths with handsome yet awkward revolutionary Anton (Kevin Hanchard). After an unfortunate run-in with the constabulary, they seek refuge in an old building only to find something even more dangerous and sinister within. Nina's father, the infamous Rat Catcher (Lawrence Bayne), may be their only hope. One of my favourite animators is the great Don Bluth (*The Secret of NIMH, An American Tail*) and his influence rings throughout. Be sure to check out the *Red Iron Road* series, as the ferocious actioner "VRDLK" and the rotoscoped dystopia of "No.8 Reporting" are highly recommended, as well.

JAY CLARKE

All of the tech design is superb, ranging from the angular, metallic cityscapes to the Debussy-inspired score (by Jan Sléska). Despite a few stumbles (the cast would've benefitted from a bit more diversity), *Restore Point* is a gripping exercise in future tense.

LISA MORTON

FINDING DARIO

DARIO ARGENTO: PANICO

Starring Dario Argento, Asia Argento and Guillermo del Toro Directed by Simone Scafidi

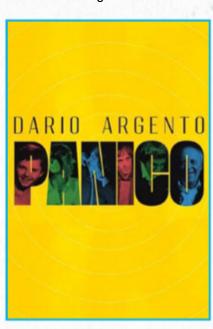
Written by Manlio Gomarasca, David Pulici and Simone Scafidi Shudder

Horror fans both loved and loathed director Simone Scafidi's 2019 Lucio Fulci documentary *Fulci for Fake* [*RM#196*]. It told *The Beyond* director's story through the narrative trick of an actor interviewing Fulci's family and colleagues to prepare to play him in a film. Scafidi uses a similarly cute device in *Dario Argento: Panico* to examine the life and work of the *Suspiria* filmmaker, but the results are far more subtle and profound.

Argento plays himself in a kind of framing tale that sees him parcelled off to a luxury country hotel to write a script. In between scenes of him settling in and getting to work, Scafidi tells Argento's story through interviews with his family, including first wife Maria Casale and daughters Asia and Fiore; colleagues like filmmakers Michele Soavi (*Cemetery Man*) and Lamberto Bava (*Demons*); and worshipful younger fans-turned-filmmakers such as Guillermo del Toro, Nicolas Winding Refn, and Gaspar Noé. Scafidi weaves these talking heads in with

fascinating making-of footage from the likes of 1987's *Opera* and historical media coverage of 1970's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, the success of which launched his career in America.

Argento provides many insights into his filmmaking obsessions, like his love of beautiful female protagonists stemming from watching his photographer mother



shoot the Italian beauties of the day, including Sophia Loren, in her studio when he was a child. But it is his daughter Asia, who starred in many of her father's films, who provides the deepest insights, including her belief that her characters essentially represented his anxieties and fears.

The common view of Argento as a master of horror whose films are largely incomprehensible is not challenged here. But this playful documentary makes a filmmaker who has filmed some of the most inhumane acts of violence very human.

SEAN PLUMMER

YOUR BIGGEST FEAR JUST GOT BIGGER

FROM DIRECTOR KIAH ROACHE-TURNER

ONLY IN THEATERS APRIL 12











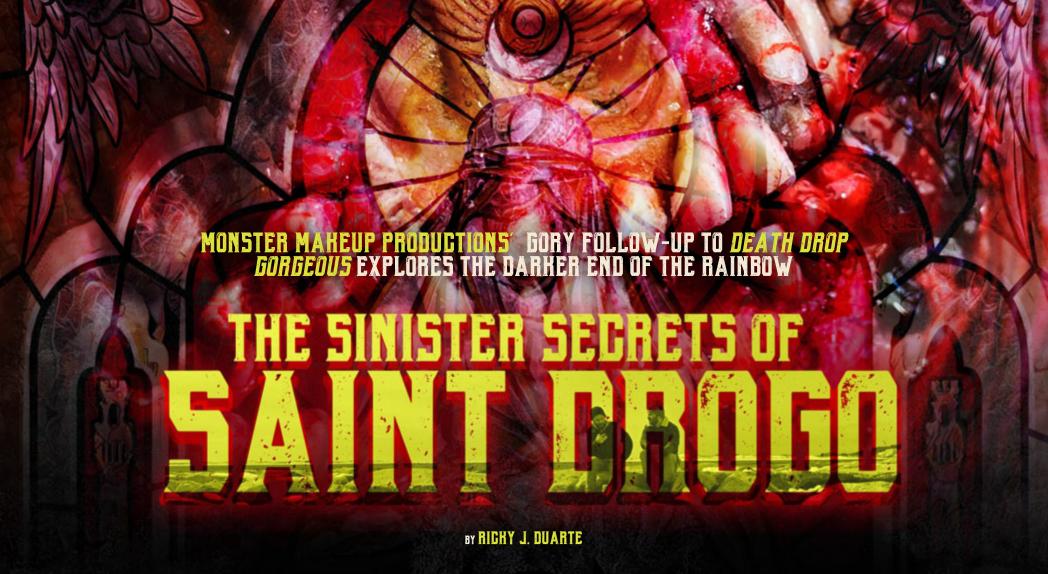












HE HORROR GENRE HAS LONG BEEN ABUNDANT IN QUEER INFLUENCE ALTHOUGH, HISTORICALLY, REPRESENTATION OF QUEER CHARACTERS HAS PROVEN TO BE LESS THAN flattering. Fortunately, recent years have shown that when allowed to tell their own stories, queer artists have a lot to say and aren't afraid to write it out in blood. Enter Saint Drogo:

outfit Monster Makeup Productions (namely Michael J. Ahern, Brandon Perras-Sanchez, and Ryan Miller), the film is a modern, queer take on folk horror, exploring themes of gentrification, addiction, religious zealotry, and conformity, as well as nuances of gay relationships seldom showcased on screen. Having made waves in the festival circuit, collecting awards and accolades across the continent, Saint Drogo is finally making its Blu-ray debut this April through the filmmakers themselves.

"For us, self-distribution is really the only means in which we can continue making movies," says Ahern. "Anything we earn is money that goes to the budget for the next one. The landscape for micro-budget filmmakers like us can be really treacherous and there are a lot of people in the distribution world that are looking to make a quick buck off your art."

In the film, struggling couple Adrian (Ahern) and Caleb (Perras-Sanchez) take a winter road trip to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to mend the cracks of their crumbling relationship. Their holiday, however, coincides with the arrival of a mysterious package from Caleb's ex, and their getaway becomes a search for the now-missing former beau. Hooking up

with local Eric (Matthew Pidge), they soon discover arcane secrets and cultish horrors about the year-round inhabitants of P-town, revealing a darkness that lurks beneath the town's cheerily rainbow veneer.

Setting the film in the popular gay haven in the wintery off-season casts a

haunting aura of dread that's a far cry from the quaint charm of Cape Cod, which has been known as a safe haven for LGBTQ+ tourism since the Stonewall Riots of 1969.

"As a New Englander, you frequent P-town in the summer because that's what you're supposed to do as a gay per-

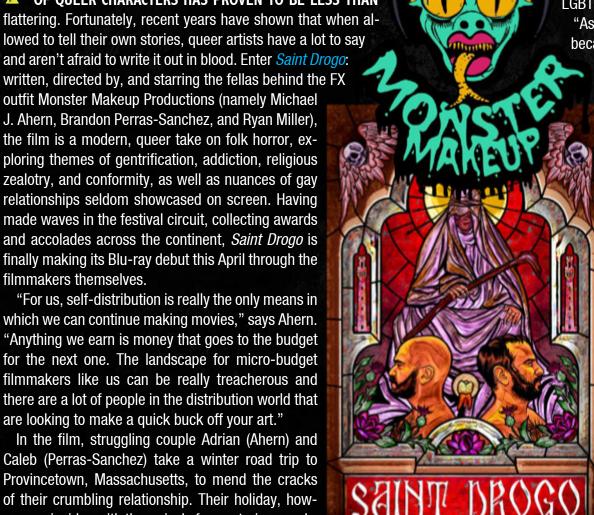
son, apparently," explains Ahern. "One winter, I went there in the off-season and the setting was just so

bleak and beautiful, but it was also super depressing to learn about year-round [residents] and how a lot of them struggle to make ends meet when it's not the on-season. A lot of folks delve into drug usage. And so I thought the setting was just beautiful and bleak and a stark contrast and sort of like an underbelly to what and how P-town is generally portrayed."

Punctuating the themes of isolation and self-identity, Saint Drogo also benefits from the shocking and visceral gore effects sequences designed by genre veteran Joe Castro, whose 2012 film The Summer of Massacre once held the record for highest body count in a slasher film (155 kills). In Saint Drogo, Castro showcases his skills with harrowing sequences including disembowelment, hobbling, and a grisly final tableau that's both disturbing and emotional. But shooting practical effects in the frost of coastline winter presented its own challenges for

"We chose a very cold time of year to do it, so there were some little glitches along the way," recalls Perras-Sanchez. "For the decapitation scene,

the blood froze. So the first time we cut the head off, it didn't really work right - the blood shot out the back. [Then] we had almost our entire set and props washed away by the ocean. We were filming around the beach and we read the tide chart wrong. So the high tide came way sooner than we thought."









"ABANDONED" NO MORE

When Nacho Cerdá's *The Abandoned* opened theatrically in the U.S. in November 2006 as part of the After Dark Horrorfest, it was one of the highlights of that eight-film showcase; so much so that it earned a stand-alone re-release by After Dark Films and Lionsgate the following February. Yet when the latter company brought the octet to DVD a little later in 2007, *The Abandoned*'s special-features package was distinctly lacking – just a making-of featurette, as opposed to the audio commentaries, deleted scenes, and other extras that graced the other Horrorfest titles.

This spring, however, The Abandoned receives its hi-def disc due as Unearthed Films releases it on a fully loaded Blu-ray April 9. This edition will give horror buffs a new chance to appreciate Cerdá's supernatural mood piece, which the director scripted with celebrated genre DP Karim Hussain (who wrote the original screenplay for himself to direct) and Richard Stanley. Set on a remote island in the wilds of Russia, the film stars Anastasia Hille as Marie, who travels to an inherited house that proves to be in a state of great disrepair. There she encounters Nicolai (Karel Roden of Hellboy and Frankenstein's Army), who claims to be her twin brother, as well as zombie-like doppelgängers of the two of them, propelling her into an inescapable nightmare in which the rules of time become unhinged.

Unearthed Films CEO Stephen Biro has been

interested in *The Abandoned* for over a decade, since he pacted with Cerdá to put the filmmaker's acclaimed shorts *Aftermath* and *Genesis* on disc.

"After Dark Films had it for a good fifteen years," Biro recalls. "We'd been waiting for [Spanish production company] Filmax International to get their rights back, and once they did,

we jumped on it! We picked that up from them along with *Invitation Only*, a Taiwanese horror movie that did really well. *The Abandoned* is a great haunted-house film, and I think more horror fans need to see it because it has an interesting take, with the string theory and quantum mechanics stuff going on.

"I know a number of viewers have said they were confused by the movie, and they didn't quite understand what was going on, but it's a haunted house – you're not supposed to know what's

happening, you know?" he continues. "It's pretty wild; what Nacho and Karim and Richard wrote was totally different, and I'm glad that they had the budget to pull it off. It's just one of those creepy movies that went under the radar."

Recently, *The Abandoned* has been reappearing overseas, with French and Spanish companies putting it out on Blu-ray. Those editions provided some of the content for Unearthed's disc,

including the transfer.

"We got a very clean scan, which I believe the other companies around the world have been using," says David Hood, Unearthed's general manager.

"We got lucky," Biro adds, "because scanning and restoration can be quite costly. It was a 1080 scan, so it was probably done back at the

time when that was the norm, before 4K."

Among the special features are that aforementioned making-of piece as well as four featurettes ported over from the French Blu-ray released a few years ago by ESC Editions: "In the Den of 'The Abandoned," "Nacho Cerdá: Facing Death," Little Secrets of Nacho Cerdá," and "A Dialogue Between Friends" - the latter with the director in conversation with film-

maker Douglas Buck (Family Portraits: A Trilogy of America).

"We didn't get much from Filmax in the way of extras," Biro says. "We got a few deleted scenes, some outtakes, things like that. It wasn't a whole big smorgasbord of stuff."

"Usually with the older films like this," Hood adds, "they'll have the main elements, but when it comes to the extras they produced, they don't



know where they are, they didn't keep track. So, some of what we have is derived from other releases; we always grab the different discs when we can, just so we can have everything, or know what's out there. The French Blu-ray was the one that had the four short documentary features, but unfortunately, they all have burned-in French subtitles. Wild Side, I believe they were called, did not have those featurettes without the subtitles, so we have to present them that way, but at least we got them. And then Nacho couldn't find anything for us, like behind-the-scenes video; none of that stuff exists."

"He looked for a couple of weeks," Biro notes, "and that's always a shame when you hit the filmmakers up, and they're like, 'I don't have anything.' A lot of stuff just gets lost."

The Unearthed team were able to put together three substantial bonuses: on-camera interviews with Cerdá, Hussain, and Stanley conducted by extreme horror journalist/*Ghouls Magazine* founder/editor Zoë Rose Smith. At the time of this interview, Hood was in the process of editing the video chats, which came in at about an hour apiece.

"I was juggling with Nacho, Karim, and Richard, and I couldn't get them to actually commit to a date or a time," Biro says. "So I contacted Zoë, and she was ecstatic to interview them. And as soon as I got her to go after them, suddenly, boom! They lined up. She managed to get the interviews, and it happened within a week and a half, while I had been after them for three months, trying to set something up!"

This, despite the fact that Biro also had past correspondence with Hussain.

"I once tried to put out *Subconscious Cruelty*, the first feature he directed," Biro reveals. "I was supposed to release that back in 2006, and we had everything going, but then it fell through. I think the fans will enjoy his segment, because I don't see Karim in too many interviews. He's a dynamic cinematographer, and I'm happy to see that he's been getting bigger and bigger, and working on major films. I'm glad we got him."

With its emphasis on brooding atmosphere, *The Abandoned* is a bit of an anomaly in the Unearthed library, which is chock full of extreme fright films, including many from Asia. Among







their future releases are Xavier Gens' Frontier(s), a more brutal title from After Dark Horrorfest, and a pair of films inspired by true cases: the Malcolm McDowell-starring serial-killer thriller Evilenko, with a full restoration/4K scan, and Village of Doom, "a rarity from Japan, about one

of the first mass shooters," as Biro describes it.

"It's pretty outrageous. We're always trying to get movies that are really hard to find, and we've got about 24 films lined up, including a bunch we haven't announced yet. We've got a lot on our plate!"





CAME FROM BOWEN BASEMENT



DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Hair of the Bear by John W. Bowen

lenty of horror fans will tell you that their favourite movies were made under odd circumstances, or for odd reasons, or both. Friday the 13th famously got financing without a script, on the strength of a teaser trailer that featured only the film's logo, a vague voice-over, and shattering glass. Phantasm happened because Don Coscarelli's initial plans to adapt a popular novel fell through. Future Oscar-winner Peter Bogdanovich was able to make the clever postmodern thriller Targets because Boris Karloff owed Roger Corman two days of work. The stories behind The Blair Witch Project, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Stephen King's Apt Pupil, Tod Browning's Freaks, and countless others are stranger than the films themselves.

Of course, those are all good films and, in some cases, great ones. Grizzly II: Revenge is not. Not even close. In fact, it's an incomprehensible, sloppy-drunk piece of shit. But the circumstances

surrounding its creation and eventual release are just so deeply weird that I felt compelled to spend a column blithering about it at you, Wretched Reader. Which in turn meant I had to actually watch the fucking thing first.

Now make no mistake - I love William Girdler's original Grizzly, a cheesy, violent, mercilessly fun entry in the post-Jaws bad animal deluge that became one of the most surprising success stories of 1976, and hence,

simply had to be sequelized. So at some point in the early '80s, a bunch of people were dispatched to Hungary to make Grizzly II: Revenge a reality.

Top billing in that incarnation goes to pre-Wild at Heart Laura Dern, pre-superstar George Clooney, and pre-trainwreck Charlie Sheen. Now, we've all seen those revisionist casting reissues, in which before-they-were-famous actors in small parts get star treatment in the promo materials, but this is the only instance I can think of in



which all three "principals" get offed by a bear in the first six minutes. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's some kind of record.

Nonetheless, some smaller big names prop up the pedestal. We have Louise (Nurse Ratched!) Fletcher, John Rhys-Davies (Raiders of the Lost Ark, Lord of the Rings) as the obligatory Quint stand-in with a catastrophic mullet and the most

appalling French-Canadian accent ever mangled by a Welshman, Deborah Raffin (damn near everything in the '70s and almost - but ultimately not - Sandy in Grease), a delectable Deborah Foreman, aaand... Nazareth - the band, not the city. Seriously. (But not really. And yet... sort of.) Most credits name/blame Hungarian director André Szöts and screenwriting team Joan McCall and David Sheldon, who wrote the original Grizzly, but it's

all a bit nebulous. And behind all this, Joseph Ford Proctor, a skeevy American producer who absconded with most of the budget after the first day of principal photography, leaving his Hungarian counterpart Suzanne Nagy holding the bag. Despite the heroic efforts of Nagy (and, presumably, all who believed), the Hungarian government would ultimately impound most of the gear over unpaid bills, leaving Grizzly II in an unedited pile for almost four decades. The footage was finally acquired by the brain trust at Gravitas Ventures, and indifferently mashed together and released in 2021 to an aggressively indifferent public.

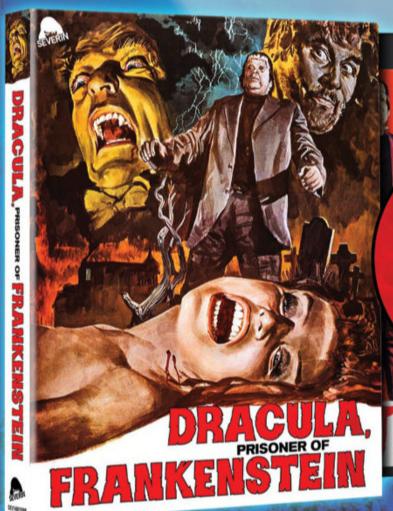
Since the premise involves a mama bear exacting a terrible vengeance over her cubs getting poached and culminates in said grudge-holding predator attacking attendees of a big outdoor music festival, a bunch of footage was shot at an actual 1982 festival headlined by Nazareth in Pilisborosjenő, Hungary (look it up, slacker). No actual Nazareth footage appears in the film - not even their logo - but there's about a half-hour's worth of unbelievably wretched '80s Hungarian pop music, which makes most other wretched '80s pop music seem somewhat less wretched. Why so much concert footage? Because there's hardly any footage of bear attacks and only a nominal amount of story to pad out the run time, which clocks in at an epic 74 minutes but somehow feels... longer.

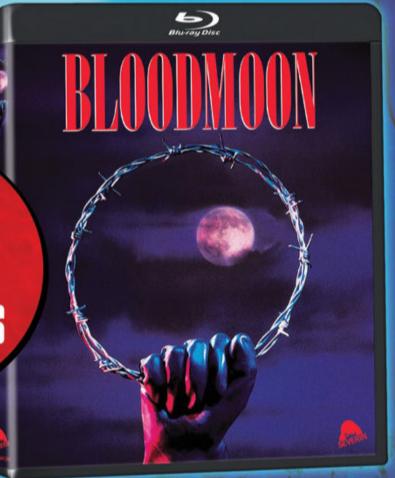
And now the big finale: choppily edited, shitty-looking animatronic bear footage/sped-up footage of guy in Jeep/miscued fireworks display creates even more chaos backstage, allowing bear to run more amok/guy attacks bear with forklift/ bear knocks over forklift/people impaled on stage scaffolding/more shitty band footage/more shitty animatronic bear footage, and then everyone gets the hell out of my basement, "pursued by bear" yeah, that's Shakespeare. Look it up.

"ONE OF THE BEST LABELS IN PHYSICAL MEDIA."

DELIAMORIE DELIAMORE



















FILES FROM THE BLACK MUSEUM

THE LONG SHADOWS OF CLASSIC HORROR'S PAST

O BY PAUL CORUPE (

Chaotic Evil

"AMORAL PROVOCATEURS MAY BE COMMON TODAY, BUT YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO FIND A CLEAR FORERUNNER IN *DEVIL'S PARTNER*, AN OFFBEAT SATANIC SHOCKER THAT FIRST HIT DRIVE-INS IN THE EARLY 1960s."

t's all fun and games, they say, until someone gets hurt. Whether it's bogus viral posts, deepfake videos, or Al-generated deceptions, there seems to be an increasing number of hoaxes these days that use digital deception to sow confusion and disorder. It's tempting to see this trend as the latest twist on a time-honoured tradition – after all, merry pranksters have long been a mainstay of folklore and literature. But while those figures used mischief and humour to challenge our beliefs and nudge us towards deeper realizations, modern tricksters appear instead to see chaos and cruelty as the endgame. These kinds of amoral provocateurs may be common today, but you might

be surprised to find a clear forerunner in *Devil's Partner*, an offbeat satanic shocker that first hit drive-ins in the early 1960s. Long available only in scratchy public domain prints, the film recently made its HD debut from Film Masters, paired with Roger Corman's classic cheapie *Creature from the Haunted Sea* (1961).

The film gets going when elderly hermit Pete Jenson (Ed Nelson) makes a pact with Old Scratch to turn over his soul in exchange for a new lease on life. When Pete mysteriously dies soon after, his younger and more charismatic "nephew" Nick Richards (also Ed Nelson) rolls into town to finalize arrangements. That's when things take a sharp turn for the worse — once Nick takes a shine to local gal Nell (Jean Allison), her boyfriend David Simpson (Richard Crane) is suddenly mauled by his faithful dog, disfiguring him and sending him into a depressive spiral. There are other suspicious accidents involving animals as well — the town drifter (Byron Foulger) is stomped to death by a horse, another dies after a swig of goat's milk, and a third crashes his car while trying to avoid a cow. The town's sheriff (Spencer Carlisle) and doctor (Edgar Buchanan) are baffled by these developments, even as it becomes obvious that Pete Jenson is using strange satanic powers to take his revenge on the townsfolk he feels have done him wrong.

Directed by Charles R. Rondeau, *Devil's Partner* is an engaging pressure cooker that looks at how Nick's arrival turns the sleepy desert town of Furnace Flats into a hotbed of drama and death. While the story never really



kicks into high gear, there's no denying that

Nick is uniquely devious when compared to characters in other horror films of the era. Usually sporting a cocky smile, he mischievously hides his true identity from the locals even as he orchestrates a revenge plot meant to uncover a savage, animalistic current under the polite pretensions of his genteel neighbours. Painting crude satanic symbols on the floor of his wooden shack, Pete/Nick has somehow learned how to shapeshift into creatures — including a literal snake, at one point — in a petty,

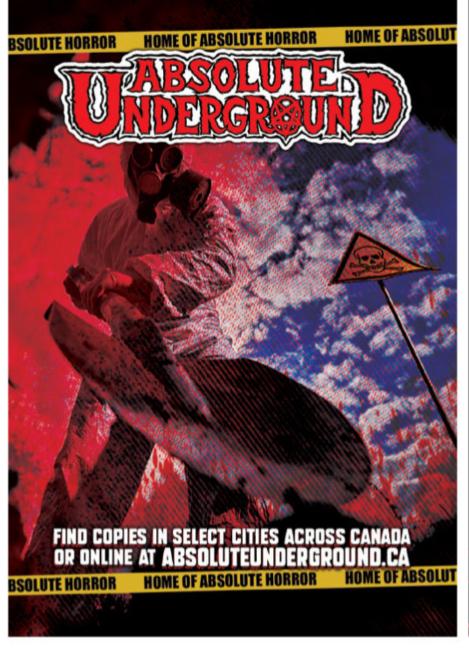
mean-spirited effort to murder his enemies and

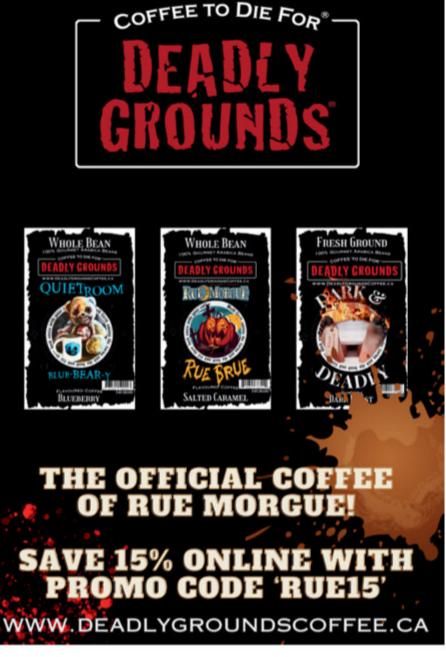
throw the local population into emotional turmoil.

If the townsfolk appear unprepared against Nick's devilish manipulation, then the same can be said about our own information-saturated era. At a time where it's common to see video game cutscenes presented as authentic war footage, fake social media accounts sowing election distrust, and videos about microchips hidden in vaccines, the art of the online prank has lost whatever hints of social consciousness it may have once had. Some have recently suggested we are in a kind of digital dark age, where our access to data has outpaced our ability to interpret or act on it. Whether you believe that or not, it's true that there is no shortage of bad actors in the same mould as Nick – sneering provocateurs who won't hesitate to pull pranks that do little else besides cause confusion and pain. As social media giants have taken actions to undo safety and trust policies, it has become obvious how easy it is for a misleading post with a high level of engagement to supersede the truth.

Trickster characters – from Bugs Bunny to Willy Wonka, and from Loki to Puck – have remained popular for the way they are able to use humour and an outsider's perspective to shed light on pressing societal problems. While Nick's own attempts to deceive and destroy his former friends are far more sinister than side-splitting, it seems that, in recent years, his brand of cruel chaos has somehow become the rule rather than the exception. What's clear is that, until social media and search algorithms start to weigh a post's intentions against its raw engagement, the last laugh will always be on us.







A CALL TO CTHULHU Norm Konyu Titan Nova **ZOMBILLENIUM VOLUME 5/6**Arthur de Pins *NBM*

FOUR GATHERED ON CHRISTMAS EVE Eric Powell, Mike Mignola, Becky Cloonan and James Harren Dark Horse BLACK SIGHT
Stephanie Phillips and
Conor Boyle
Comixology Originals

MORTAL TERROR #1 Christopher Golden, Tim Lebbon and Peter Bergting Dark Horse DEATH STRIKES: THE EMPEROR OF ATLANTIS Dave Maass, Patrick Lay and Ezra Rose Dark Horse

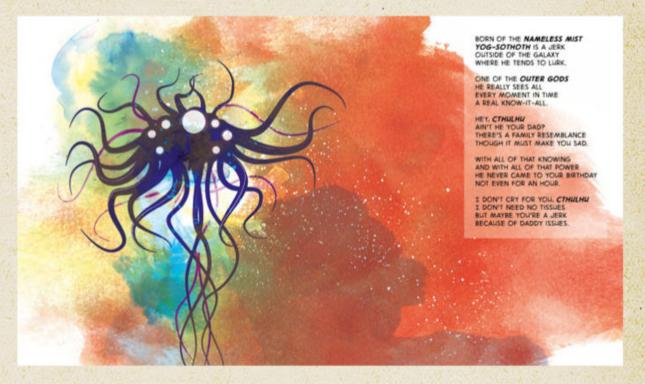


thulhu sucks. At least, that's the opinion of a certain belligerent and anonymous phone caller to the Great Old One. Yes, even the Spawn of Yog-Sothoth gets trolled. And so begins *A Call to Cthulhu*, a humorous and irreverent look at the Lovecraftian mythos that is part comic, part children's storybook, part poem, and completely absorbing.

"I was in the middle of doing a 300-page graphic novel, and on the verge of losing my mind," reveals writer/artist Norm Konyu. "I just needed something different to do for a while. I was tidying up my studio bookshelves and I came across my old Lovecraft paperbacks from when I was a teen, which I started thumbing through. Next to them on my shelf were my kids' Dr. Seuss books which they no longer wanted, and so I started to think – what if I stick these together?"

And just like that, a semi-serious treatise on Lovecraft is born. As the caller continues his diatribe to a bewildered Cthulhu, he picks apart several of the author's notorious tales, pointing out exactly why he thinks they all stink. Told in verse and beautifully rendered across two-page spreads, *A Call to Cthulhu* reads like a collection





A Call To Cthulhu: A loving lampooning of H.P. Lovecraft's mythos, told in playful prose.

of Lovecraft's greatest hits – albeit with Eldritch tongue planted firmly in cheek. It's a delicate balancing act for Konyu as he roasts the stories, pointing out their absurdities while displaying admiration.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone who is 100 percent on board with Lovecraft, and that's a good thing considering his personal views, but this extends to the writing itself," he says. "Most people agree – great concepts, not such great prose – so I think my approach reflects this. There's absolutely a love/hate thing going on, which probably makes for a more interesting experience – if I was in love with all aspects of his work, there may not have been a book in it at all!"

Love him or hate him, Lovecraft continues to be one of the most influential horror writers ever, something which Konyu readily admits.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the original work being in the public domain," he remarks, "which has allowed people in all media to take the ball and run with it, expanding on the building blocks he laid down. And those blocks are great concepts which can be taken in so many directions. There's a timelessness to the stories as

well – the Elder Gods live in realms beyond ours, so their stories can be told in any era of human history, including our present one."

It's doubtful that even the most hardcore Love-craft fan would find offense in Konyu's book but even if they do, they can still find enjoyment in the lavish illustrations afforded each tale. Vibrant colours, seemingly at odds with Lovecraft's bleak and barren creations, permeate the pages: the sumptuous orange of R'Lyeh's sky, the deep purple of Innsmouth, and the blood red of the Scarlet Desert.

"I'm a fan of colour, so I think it was inevitable, but it also helps with the tone of the book," says Konyu. "If I was to do a straight-up adaptation of one of his stories, it might be difficult to use colours so freely, but as the heart of the book is lighthearted, I thought I could get away with those choices. You never know, a bit of colour might have brightened the man himself up — a bit of flowery wallpaper in his study, perhaps? Though I have a feeling he slaved over a desk in a dark and grey room."

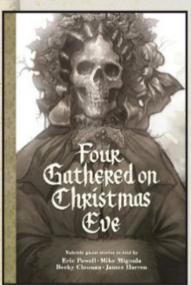
FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

QUICK CUTS

Is it possible to enjoy the final two stories of a series without having read any of the previous entries? In the case of *Zombillenium*, the answer is a resounding yes. Collected in one edition, "Black Friday" and "Sabbath Grand Derby" conclude the tale of Gretchen Webb, a half-demon witch who works at the eponymous amusement park: a place where real monsters are employed, and patrons run the risk of being devoured and their souls condemned to hell for all eternity. There's enough humour and action to entertain the uninitiated, particularly during the Grand Derby: a witch competition where participants rack up points by whacking unwilling human players with a magic ball that turns them into zombies. Along the way, several character-driven subplots are resolved which are undoubtedly more poignant for those reading since the beginning, but that's just more incentive to run out and get the entire series.



Twas the night before Christmas and most everyone seems to have forgotten the old Victorian tradition of telling ghost stories on Christmas Eve; an oversight that the makers of



Four Gathered on Christmas Eve hope to rectify. A quartet of horror tales are told by four acquaintances, gathered together in a spooky house on a snowy Christmas Eve in 1843. Ostensibly the creators themselves, they spin their yarns and critique one another until it all explodes in a de-

liciously hostile denouement. It's hard to resist a book that involves the talents of Eric Powell, Mike Mignola, Becky Cloonan, and James Harren, and each story proves entertaining, taking full advantage of Victoriana and being suitably

distinct from one another. Unusual for an anthology, however, it's the framing tale that provides the most fun, so read the book in a single sitting to get the full effect of what will hopefully become an annual tradition.

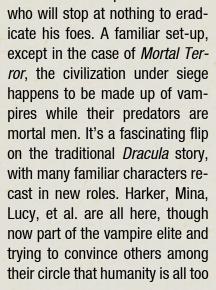
Of all the horror tropes,

sane-person-stuck-in-a-mental-asylum continues to resonate with me. Perhaps it's having to uselessly proclaim your innocence to guards and doctors who may be keeping you there for their own nefarious reasons... or maybe I'm just paranoid. Either way, *Black Sight* strikes an icky chord. In 1964 Amsterdam, Alex awakens after a night of par-

tying to find the bloody body of the girl she slept with lying next to her, dead. Or is she? Maintaining her innocence and swearing she saw the corpse move, Alex is quickly shunted off to a mental hospital, where she is exposed to further dangers as well as recurring visions of the girl she's accused of murdering. That Alex is being set up is revealed early on, but exactly by whom and why remains to be seen. With its stark use of colour, especially a urine

yellow, *Black Sight* is a gritty and harrowing mystery that may leave you in need of a good scrubbing.





real and poses a serious threat to their undead society. Most intriguing is the newfangled vampire Renfield, an asylum inmate who yearns to serve humanity and bask in the sunlight. With

> the leaders of both sides still to be revealed, the stage is certainly set for even more surprises.



It's impossible to read Death

Strikes: The Emperor of Atlantis without being influenced by its tragic origins. Based on an operetta written by two Jewish men in 1943 while imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp who both perished in Auschwitz the following year, this graphic novel is adapted from the surviving manuscript. Set

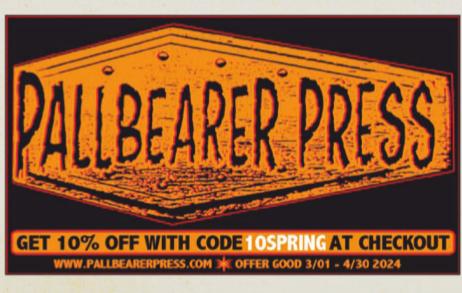
in an alternative universe where Atlantis never sank and has become one of the dominant world powers through tyranny, *Death Strikes* is a trea-

tise on life and death in which personifications of each debate their respective value in the face of unending war. When Death decides that he's had enough and goes on strike, Emperor Overall's thirst for conquest leads to further chaos as battered victims are unable to die. Satirical, tragic, funny,



and thought-provoking, it's a work that's difficult to critique and impossible to forget.







INTERCIFE BOOKS

THE GOOD UNKNOWN AND OTHER GHOST STORIES

Stephen VolkTartarus Press

As author/screenwriter Stephen Volk proves in his latest collection, a great ghost story can deeply unsettle or it can break your heart, and in the rarest of instances, it does both.

The eleven stories that comprise *The Good Un-known* lean towards the quiet and subtle, sometimes leaving readers to wonder if there's truly a haunting in the supernatural sense or just a person who is haunted by the tragedies that have befallen them. This is certainly the case in "Baby on Board," one of the book's standout pieces

THE GOOD

UNKNOWN

AND OTHER

GHOST STORIES

Stephen Volk

and one of three stories original to this collection (the remaining eight are reprints). Here, an off-duty policeman pulls over to assist a motorist in trouble, only it's like no trouble he's encountered before: a sleep-deprived dad driving around the restless ghost of his dead son in hopes of lulling it to sleep. (The loss of

ERIC LAROCCA

SKIN WAS

children also figures into the short but utterly tragic "Three Fingers, One Thumb.") "Lost Loved Ones," another of the book's originals, is equally striking, with its story of a message from beyond

the grave that's grievously misunderstood.

Other tales within, including "31/10" (a sequel to Volk's infamous 1992 BBC production *Ghostwatch*) and "The Good Unknown" (about an actress taking on her final role), mine the writer's ties to the entertainment industry. A few stories wander into more far-flung territory: "Hojo the Fearless" features a supposedly fearless samurai and reads

almost like a parable; "The Waiting Room" offers a fictional spin on a mysterious slice of actual literary history involving Charles Dickens; and "The Crossing" is a strange tale of possession involving an unusual stone told entirely in the second person.

With *The Good Unknown* Volk reminds us that he's just as comfortable and skilled at creating

chills for the printed page as he is for the screen. The spirits that haunt this book are worth knowing, even if several of them demand that you leave a piece of yourself behind when reading.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

THIS SKIN WAS ONCE MINE AND OTHER DISTURBANCES

Eric LaRocca
Titan Books

Eric LaRocca's new four-story collection examines how easily our most meaningful relationships can be incinerated from the inside out until only ash and ruin remain. In the title story, we're brought into a tender moment between an underachieving lost soul named Jay and her girlfriend, Pia. Sadly, a moment is all we get. Soon Jay's past pulls her back home following the death of her father, a man she hardly knew but loved all the same, forcing her to reunite with her dying mother after years of disconnected bliss. Jay makes the most of her time by exploring the sprawling house she once called home until awful secrets reveal themselves and Jay must fully confront an unavoidable fate.

In "Seedling," our narrator is called to the bedside of his recently deceased mother where his father implores him to pay his respects. Despite misgivings about getting too close to her body, the son must peel back the veil of death as well as his own skin if he's to comprehend

what's truly at stake. "All the Parts of You That Won't Easily Burn" drops us in on Enoch, who's been sent off to find a carving knife for the dinner party his husband is hosting. Along with finding the perfect knife, Enoch also stumbles across an elite society where exquisite pleasures are traded for sacrifices of the flesh. The final tale, "Prickle," is a slight departure. Exploring a toxic relationship of a different sort, this one lulls readers into

a state of indifference before ripping the ground out from beneath them.

Reaffirming his rightful place at the terror fiction table, LaRocca's latest leaves us shattered and twisted into something dangerously unrecognizable as he pushes aside our reality like layers of skin worth slipping into.

RICK HIPSON

A CRITICAL COMPANION TO WES CRAVEN

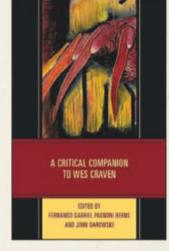
Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and John Darowski, eds.

Lexington Books

Chances are, if you're a regular reader of *RM*, you'll agree that academic studies of horror films are invaluable to understanding our genre in relation to the world around us, the craftsmanship that went into the movies we love, and filmmaking in general. Chances are you'll also agree that these studies vary wildly, from informative and

accessible to virtually impenetrable to anyone outside the halls of academia.

The good news for Wes Craven fans is that most of the essays in *A Critical Companion* fall into the former category. The even better news is that the book does an excellent job of evaluating the filmmaker's body of work — including his



less-discussed porn films and television output – from a broad variety of angles. Thematically divided into four parts ("Space, Time, Urbanities," "Traumatic Aspects," "The Authorial Voice," and "Sociological/Philosophical Inquiries"), each part contains three to five essays. For those lacking a film studies background, the contributors include brief histories/summaries where necessary to catch you up. For instance, in the piece "The Most Dreadful of Horrors: Studio Interference and Authorship in *The Fireworks Woman* (1975), *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995) and *Cursed* (2005)," the writers take time to provide the origin and history of "auteur theory," which is critical to understanding their contribution.

Over the course of seventeen essays, Craven's work is assessed and analysed in terms of its recurring themes (rubber reality, subversion of safe places, etc.), as well as from gender, racial, queer, and faith perspectives. His most popular films get plenty of attention, but there's also a case made for a contemporary re-evaluation of 2011's *Scre4m* as prophetic of the outsized role social media and the hunger for online fame would have in our lives a decade later. Even practical effects and music get their due here.



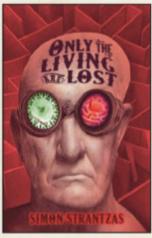
While you may not agree with every critical reading in the book, you will come away with a greater appreciation of Craven as an auteur and likely a greater appreciation of film studies in general.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

ONLY THE LIVING ARE LOST

Simon Strantzas

Hippocampus Press



Simon Strantzas is one of Canada's most prominent weird authors, and his sixth collection affirms his mastery of the short form. At least three stories share the same leitmotif: death of a close sibling revealing "an unknowable life in the periphery of [one's] own." In "Vertices," after grandmother's passing a strange phenomenon haunts her granddaughter in one particular room of gramma's house. In "In the Event of Death," mother's death makes a man search for her real past, including his own unknown father. "My father was always this unknowable being in my life, like a living, breathing secret with which I interacted only superficially and sporadically," says the protagonist of "Black Bequeathments" who, after his estranged father's death, discovers a cheap-looking statue of

some impossible animal among his belongings – and receives plenty of sinister interest upon offering it for sale online.

Most of Strantzas' characters are indeed lost, but some readers may be, too – in the dimly lit blind alleys of his plots. *What* is the alien creature which a male hooker sees behind a client's child's appearance in "Circle of Blood"? *What* is the strange symbol which a man finds himself "marked" by after a drunken blackout in "Doused by Night"? How come no one ever noticed "Antripuu," a giant, Wendigo-like creature that chases a group of hikers in the woods? Is there a metaphysical weight to the lump of clay which two good-for-nothing lovebirds steal from an Egyptian temple in the action-packed novella *Clay Pigeons*?

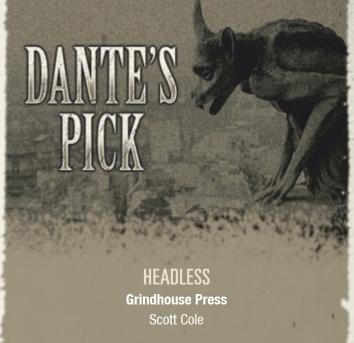
Strantzas will provide only a few pieces of these puzzles, and sometimes, perhaps, too few for readers' full involvement. Still, for those who prefer mysteries to solutions, this batch of elliptical, open-ended weirdness will be just right.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

WHAT GROWS IN THE DARK

Jaq Evans Mira

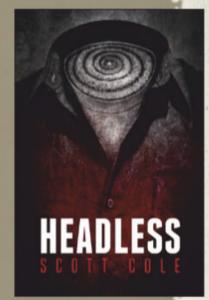
Brigit Weylan is a queer woman with a secret – several of them, actually, and they all unceremoniously collide in the pages of Jaq Evans' *What Grows in the Dark*. One of Brigit's secrets has to do with her job as half of a duo that investigates and then dispels paranormal activity, filming it all for online posting in hopes of landing a television deal someday. That secret is that none



Judged by premise alone – people's heads start exploding but they just keep on walking around, becoming increasingly violent – *Headless* probably shouldn't work as well as it does. But author Scott Cole takes his wild idea and commits to it so fully in this short novel that the result is utterly gory and utterly compelling in equal measure.

The tale begins with Linzy waiting for her partner Ron to return from the bar. A little lovin' is just what she needs to cure this godawful headache, she thinks, so when Ron comes stumbling in late and doesn't bother to turn on any lights,

it doesn't faze her, and she launches right into her seduction. It's going well - apart from Ron being strangely silent until she feels wetness on his shirt and hits the light switch. To her horror, he's headless and still trying to reach out and grasp her. She flees to her neighbour Carter's apartment and thus begins a frenetic attempt to make sense of and survive what



soon becomes a full-on epidemic of exploding noggins.

While it's impossible to say if it's intentional or not, *Headless* is bound to remind readers of the work of Jack Ketchum and Edward Lee, and more than a little of the 2006 James Gunn film *Slither* once the true nature of the cranial detonations becomes clear, before the whole thing slips into Lovecraft territory for the bleak final denouement.

Extreme horror is much maligned in certain genre circles, dancing as it often does with misogyny and worse, but *Headless* manages to steer clear of all that, even adding a well-rounded trans character to the mix who helps Linzy and Carter in their increasingly futile efforts to escape the escalating zombie-apocalypse-like mayhem.

Fans of gory, visceral horror would do well to read this one... before they lose their heads.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

IN HER DEBUT NOVEL, RECORPAINTS A DISTURBING PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER'S SOUL-RENDING GRIEF AND DESCENT INTO INNER DARKNESS

ED LAGOE IS NO STRANGER TO THE HORROR COMMUNITY, HAVING PENNED THREE COLLECTIONS, EDITED THE ANTHOLOGY NIGHTMARE SKY: STORIES OF ASTRONOMICAL HORROR, and founded Death Knell Press on top of being a talented artist for hire. For those unfamiliar with her fiction, imagine a scenario where you're camping on the fringes of Stephen King's Castle Rock, only with all the seductive dangers of a Clive Barker novel and the unflinching inclinations of Jack Ketchum, and you may begin to understand why her work is worth engaging with. With In Excess of Dark (out March 15 from DarkLit Press), the author is afforded the space to dig deep into the subtleties of grief and trauma previously explored in her shorter fiction.

"The story spawned during a camping trip in the Blue Ridge Mountains in 2022," she explains. "A lot of creepy visuals and terrifying thoughts came to me during that weekend of primitive camping with my family. Thoughts that made me think, what's wrong with you? But a random string of terrible things isn't enough to make a good story. So, I paired those visuals with another back-burner book idea I had in the vault — the story of someone who could unintentionally manifest their darkest, most brutal daydreams into reality. That's when In Excess of Dark started coming together."

Lagoe writes with such intimacy that readers easily share in her characters' suffering. For instance, it's impossible not to mourn with protagonist Karina, when she returns from a family camping trip after her life is ripped apart and is forced to confront the darkness growing within her before it consumes her completely. Lagoe puts readers in the passenger seat, where Karina's dead husband once sat, so they experience every fear, bump, and hairpin turn Karina navigates in her

pursuit of understanding a darkness she can't seem to escape. Helping to fully explore the impact of this personal disintegration are Karina's overbearing, selfish mother, her best friend Clara, and Van, Clara's employee from her occult shop, who acts as a conduit for her own suspicions that awful things keep happening simply because Karina imagines the worst.

Although the author claims her character's back story and motivations never changed, she rewrote half her book after coming across and researching the theory of our shadow self (the main monster which runs through the core of this story). Fuelled by Carl Jung's theories and other articles on how problematic the shadow self can become if not properly dealt with, Lagoe leaned in extra close not only for her sake, but for the sake of the story and the readers, too. Surprisingly, things weren't always destined to be this deep.

"To be shamefully honest," Lagoe confesses, "originally, a lot of the characters in the book were going to serve as a body count – pretty much all the characters, in fact. But as I wrote and the story came together, it took

a shape I wasn't expecting."

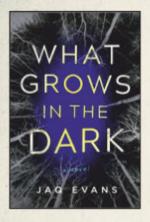
Lagoe goes on to explain, "I didn't think it would be as impactful without Karina's palpable grief and darkness. I needed to feel it when she found her son's sketchbook at the crash site. I needed to see the blood on his face and experience her barely beating broken heart. I needed to cry with her as she lost her mind. As a mother, going into those dark thoughts was hard. But for this book, if it wasn't on the page, it felt like it would have been an injustice to the story."

In Excess of Dark ultimately transcends the terror it explores by offering a way to safely understand it and perhaps even overcome it. To that end, Lagoe passes on some well-earned wisdom to help see us through our own darkest thoughts.

"I hope readers will be inspired to stop sitting alone in the dark, and maybe go for coffee with a friend," she says. "Talk about the weird dream you had about the blood orange filled with real blood. Share that strange

daydream you had about a cartoon anvil landing on your boss's head. Or if you don't want to talk about these things, write them down. Put the darkness on the page as a creative outlet and keep that shadowy part of yourself happy. If you don't, who knows what could happen."





of it is real. That is, until Brigit and her production partner lan are lured back to her hometown, Ellis Creek, by a big paycheque to investigate a pair of disappearances that may have something to do with her sister's death years earlier. Once there, things get positively eerie, with phone calls from beyond the grave, lost time, sinister hallucinations, and a whole damn birch tree that takes root in lan's midsection. While Brigit's paranormal investigations may be fake, the thing in the woods that feeds off the town's children certainly isn't, and it

has unfinished business with her.

The book boasts an exceptionally diverse cast of characters. Unfortunately, some of the folks we meet in Ellis Creek feel a tad underdeveloped and, as a result, have the tendency to blend into one another as the book charges towards its climax. Brigit also isn't the most likeable protagonist – even if one makes allowances for the considerable trauma she's endured – in that she continues keeping secrets that directly result in the people around her getting injured or worse. Whether any of that is redeemed by the sacrifices she eventually makes will depend on the individual reader.

What Grows in the Dark is a well-paced, if at times frustrating, horror novel with a powerful, mysterious force at its core. If creepy stuff in the woods is the thing that gets your spine a-tingling, you could do far worse than a walk through these trees at night.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

THE PLASTIC PRIEST

Nicole Cushing Cemetery Dance

There is plenty to attract you to *The Plastic Priest*. The author is a Bram Stoker Award-winning novelist and a two-time nominee for the Shirley Jackson Award. The publisher's description promises an unusual treat: "When the soul has been thoroughly poisoned, the body must abandon it. Everything feels unreal afterwards." For some, the blurb from Ramsey Campbell on the cover will be sufficient: "I've never read anything quite like *The Plastic Priest* and I'm delighted that I have." All of these could lead an adventurous reader to expect much more than a relatively



straightforward and obvious study in a loss of faith — and then, of mind, too. A female Episcopalian priest struggles with her lack of faith in the God that she's preaching about. As a mouthpiece for a deity she doesn't really feel in her life anymore, she likens herself to a life-sized mannequin spouting empty phrases. This sensation is the source of the titular metaphor. Her crisis reaches a turning point when she encounters, alone, during a stormy night, a tempter figure in the city park: he looks like a homeless person, claims to be an actor preparing for a role, but then says he's Janus (the Roman two-faced god). For all intents and purposes, he could be Lucifer, too. In any case, what he offers, and what the priestess does, or doesn't do, seals her fate (and faith).

This novella bordering on short novel offers a readable and intriguing 108 pages which will be especially appealing to those who share the protagonist's predicament, but for the rest of us it is low on frights and high on preaching. The language is simple, the mood quirky rather than gloomy, and despite the weighty themes invoked, it all feels pretty light.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

LIBRARY DAMNED

REMEMBERING DAVID J. SKAL

've waxed on about the importance of preserving and studying horror fiction (and film) ad nauseum in these pages. While authors and filmmakers are the wizards who conjure up something magical that can transport us away from the tedium of life into worlds new and unexpected, scholars and historians are the everyday heroes who catalogue these creative journeys and help us understand their many varied nuances.

On New Year's Day, our genre lost David J. Skal – celebrated critic, historian, and leader in this realm – following a tragic vehicular collision involving a 23-year-old driver allegedly impaired by alcohol. Skal was 71. As a horror journalist, several of his books permanently grace my home library and have proven invaluable to my own genre scholarship, including 1996's *V is for Vampire: The A-Z Guide*

to Everything Undead, his seminal 2001 offering The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror, and his Bram Stoker biography Something in the Blood. Other notable non-fiction releases from Skal include Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen (1990), Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning, Hollywood's Master of the Macabre (1995, with co-author Elias Savada), Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture (1998), and Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween (2002), which was republished in 2016 by Dover Publications under the title



Halloween: The History of America's Darkest Holiday. He also tried his hand at fiction, releasing two novels, Scavengers and Antibodies, back in the 1980s.

Even if you're allergic to books, you've likely encountered Skal's extensive work in film, for which he produced a number of documentaries and commentaries for DVDs, including for the Universal Classic Monster films, Tod Browning's *Freaks, Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, and 1998's *Gods and Monsters*. In addition, he made appearances on a whopping 52 documentaries, TV specials/series, and podcasts, among them *100 Years of Horror* (1996), *The 100 Scariest Movie Moments* (2004), *The AckerMonster Chronicles* (2012), *In Search of Dracula with Mark Gatiss* (2020), and *Eli Roth's History of Horror*.

While Skal's death is inarguably tragic, senseless, and frustrating (as every needless impaired-driving death is), he leaves the world of horror with an exceptional body of work that will continue to educate generations of monster kids to come. Thank you, Mr. Skal, for making all of us that much smarter.

January has also taken some other fine horror folks from us, including Brian Lumley (award-winning author of the *Necroscope* series and more), author Stephen Gregory (*The Cormorant, The Wood-witch*), and author/poet Fred Chappell (best known to horror fans for his weird tales and the 1968 novel *Dagon*), reminding us that even if we make it to old age, life will still be far, far too short. And that's horrifying indeed. R.I.P.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

FRIGHT GALLERY CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS



THIS MONTH: THE IRREVERSIBLE IMPRINTS OF CREATURE FROM THE BLACK TATTOO

A RODANGE COLLECTIBLE





Gareth Watson, also known as Creature from the Black Tattoo, specializes in horror portraits of the wearable, permanent sort. His tattoos are vivid, highly detailed, and realistic enough to make you think they're ready to leap off the skin and wreak havoc. It's that kind of immaculate artistry that makes this creature worth visiting.

NAME

Creature from the Black Tattoo

HOMETOWN HAUNT

"I'm originally from Hounslow in London but I grew up and now work in Peterborough in the UK."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"Being a tattoo artist, I would say my main choice is needles, however I love creating digital art on Photoshop too. As for explaining each method, I kind of just make it up using techniques I've picked up along the way from artists I aspire to be as good as."

DEEDS

"The thing I'm most proud of in my tattooing career is that I did what all of my teachers and some of my elders said I'd never be able to do and became a tattoo artist. I have also gained four great companies as sponsors I get to work with."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"With my tattoos I'm always inspired to be better, either by seeing other tattooers or by critiquing my-self. With my art I'm inspired by a huge amount of amazing artists and trying to think outside of the box and create something people haven't seen before."

LAST WORDS

"Be humble and learn from others; I still pick up great techniques from people and I've been drawing for almost twenty years now. A quote I like to remember is, 'The moment you think you're the best is the same one you'll stop getting better.' Don't take yourself too seriously either, art is supposed to be fun."

RESTING PLACE

Find Gareth on Instagram @creaturefromtheblack-tattoo and at theblacklagoonco.com.

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM @PAIGEREYNOLDSART

A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS - WAS THE DETAILS BY STREET PONDER

EADER, WE'VE BEEN DUMP-STER DIVING TOGETHER IN THIS COLUMN FOR QUITE A WHILE

now, haven't we? Because we have such a strong rapport du trash, I feel that I can share some things with you without the risk of sideways glances — the kind I get in, say, the grocery store when I start rambling at a stranger about the endless delights of *Cathy's Curse*, or how *The Child* rules, or how that one scene in *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* justifies the existence of cinema as a whole. (If you've seen *Children of the Corn II*, you know what scene I'm talking about. And if you haven't seen it, please do. You'll quickly figure it out.) All of this to say that if there's anyone out there who might understand why I love *The Omen* trilogy harder than is medically advisable, it's you, fellow garbage pail kid.

I love those movies so much because they are indeed pure trash, but they're wrapped in the finery of prestige. They're the cinematic equivalent of scarfing down a questionable convenience store hot dog whilst clad in a ball gown. On the one hand, they boast casts comprising some of Hollywood's most lauded luminaries: Gregory Peck, Sam Neill, and Lee Grant. On the flipside of that, the films deliver some of the most over-the-top, elaborate, gruesome death scenes this side of the *Final Destination* franchise. In *The Omen*, Jerry Goldsmith's Oscar-winning score plays as David Warner is decapitated by a large sheet of glass. In *Damien*: Omen II, a woman is blinded and nearly pecked to death by ravens before she gets splatted by an eighteen-wheeler. And who could forget the Cajun-blackened baby during the "liquidate the Nazarene" sequence in *Omen III: The Final Conflict*? The entire trilogy is both bloody and bloody bonkers.

And it should be, right? After all, it concerns the end times, stars aligning, the ascension of the son of Satan, and all that evil jazz. Of course, you'd expect people to get killed by speeding big rigs and falling elevators along the way. But

for all of its world-ending apocalyptic overtures, there's one mundane detail that's stamped on my head, hidden away beneath my coif, like a birthmark reading "666": Damien Thorn is the Antichrist, but he still has to go to school and get a job after graduation.

Look, there are many conversations happening in the zeitgeist about nepo babies in Hollywood and beyond, and I think we can all agree that Jesus Christ and the Antichrist are the two biggest nepo babies in history. With that in mind, hey, I'm on board with Damien having to slog through the same old path that most of us must tread. He can't simply "inherit" the "Earth" just because it's his birthright. He has to take the time — the years! — to assemble his crack team of satanic lackeys and

Rottweilers, all while avoiding a deadly poke from one of the seven sacred daggers. That feels somewhat fair to us normies.

But... in *Omen II* he also has to do homework. Heck, in Omen III he has to put on a suit every day and have, like, business meetings at Thorn Industries. Damien functions completely within the same societal parameters that you and I do, which is such a wild concept to me. Of course, it's entirely possible that I'm simply overestimating the scope and reach of the Antichrist's actual abilities and powers. But if I were the Antichrist (I'm pretty sure I'm not — I'd know by now, wouldn't I?), I can tell you one thing: I wouldn't be setting a fucking alarm clock to get up in the morning. I'd bring about the end of the world on my own schedule, dammit, and that schedule would not include commuting to an office and asking my secretary to order me more paper clips or whatever. Instead, I'd be at home, lounging and enjoying my day. Liquidate the Nazarene? Eh, I'll get to it. Probably. Right after I watch Children of the Corn II again. Of course the Antichrist would love that scene. You

know the one!





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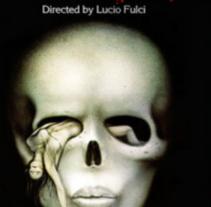


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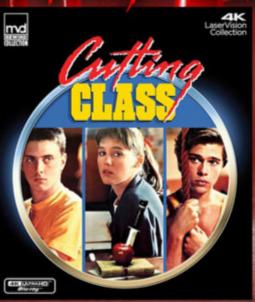
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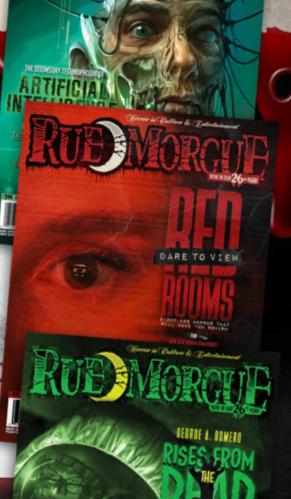
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DOA DEAD ON

REVIEWS BY JESSICA BUCK, ALEX DELLER, AARON VON LUPTON.



RETRIBUTION

SOUNDTRACK

Alan Howarth

MYSTIC VAULT Guy Magar's 1987 film Retribution may not place high in the annals of horror cinema, but it does include a solid synthpop score from Alan Howarth (They Live, Halloween III).

The looping bassline of the theme brings Giorgio Moroder's "Chase" from Midnight Express to mind, but with a hook that good, who cares? You can tell Howarth is having fun with the material, pounding away on the synths like a rock star. And you can forgive the rest of the score if it doesn't match the jubilance of those other ones, although "The Gallery" comes a close second, with a love theme on electric piano that sounds like a David Foster cut. Howarth's background working with John Carpenter (this hearkens from the same era) means that he knows what he's doing here, with a really wide sound palette that sounds great on good speakers with a thudding subwoofer. Kudos to Mystic Vault for their bluegreen cover art that showcases the killer logo, too. 🕺 💆 JS



THERE'S NOTHING

SOUNDTRACK

Christopher Thomas / Various TERROR VISION

Terror Vision offers up a vinyl release for Christopher Thomas' synth-driven score to 1991 schlocky romp There's Nothing Out There. The music totally captures the lo-fi vibe, particularly in

the spacey opening credits that add propulsive pop beats over some early CGI effects. The score makes use of percussion to keep the pace of the film going whenever it threatens to lag; even throwing in a goofy Indiana Jones riff as the movie breaks the fourth wall. Even better is the second disc, consisting of all the late '80s and early '90s songs peppered throughout the film. Although they are mostly heard at the beginning of the movie, when the kids start their spring break, the songs are pretty infectious, just check out Becky Neiman's peppy "Living It Down." Kudos to Terror Vision for splitting the score and songs onto two LPs so you can choose which one to spin: pop party



THE RATS IN THE WALLS

SPOKEN WORD

H.P. Lovecraft / Andrew Leman / Anima Morte

CADABRA RECORDS

First published in Weird Tales in 1924, "The Rats in the Walls" has to be one of Lovecraft's most horrific stories, detailing a grieving father's discovery that his family had built an underground city for the purpose of farming humans as cannibal fodder. While it has made appearances on spoken word vinyl in the past, including a now very expensive LP on Caedmon Records, Cadabra goes huge here with an anxious-sounding Andrew Leman reading this tale of madness and gore over one of the label's best custom-written scores to date, courtesy of Swedish horror soundtrack doppelgängers Anima Morte. Though the act has often cited Goblin and Fabio Frizzi in its music, here the band offers an epic electronic soundscape that magnifies the grandiosity of a story significant enough to involve multiple academics in the protagonist's quest for truth, while also adding the neces-

sary moodiness to evoke nostalgia for this unique type of weird fiction. Hair raising, indeed. 💆 💆 🗓 🗘 AVL



S.H.O.U.T

ROCK

Goosebumps

(INDEPENDENT)

Goosebumps is the tenth album in as many years from the Finnish horror rock band helmed (and hemmed) by costume maker Glamster, alongside his cronies TerrRor, Ghost, and Death. With song titles like "Slow Moving, Flesh Eating, Zombies," "The Gruesome and the Dead," and "Black Candles Burning," the album follows the schlocky B-movie theme you would expect out of a colourful horror punk band. While most tracks feature a catchy-enough singalong element, the glue tends to frequently come unstuck. The tempo wavers, and each instrument seems to follow its own beat while lyrics are shoehorned into ill-fitting rhythms. Look, this isn't exactly an album for the masses, but if you liked the first nine records, you'll appreciate S.H.O.U.T's latest effort. Given its camp quotient, this might just be a band that's better live than streamed in the background. ½ **JB**



LUCIFER

METAL

Lucifer V NUCLEAR BLAST

There's no denying that the Devil has all the best tunes but, in case you were having doubts, this loyally named act is here to hammer the message home. For its fifth album (and first for new label Nuclear Blast), Lucifer has upped its game, shucking off its drearier moments for an album's worth of bangers that wed velvet-draped gloom to rousing, full-throttle rawk. While Black Sabbath's grinning spectre still looms like an Orlok-clawed ghoul, the band is in far peppier territory as it bashes through nine tracks dedicated to death and desire. Lost Breed, Christian Mistress, and Scorpions all spring to mind as singer Johanna Pla-

RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD II SOUNDTRACK

TERROR VISION

J. Peter Robinson

Although he's scored movies in numerous genres (Wayne's World) and played keyboard for David Bowie and Phil Collins, J. Peter Robinson has built a solid pedigree for horror, including Wes Craven's New Nightmare and beyond



- and his versatility as a performer in various genres can be heard in full force here, in a score that was up for a Saturn Award back in 1987. Robinson plays it comical, with music that Mickey-Mouses over the action, and synthbased flourishes that emphasize the campy nature of the material. The cut that everybody remembers is the punchy "Dead Return" theme that rounded out the original Island Records metal/rock compilation. Now available on LP, ROTLDII's music builds on that memorable theme, although the underscore probably functioned best as a few choice cuts mixed with the Anthrax songs. Still, fans are gonna love the lenticular packaging and a chance to spin this



MOCKERY MANOR

THEME: Murder Mystery FORMAT: Audio Drama FREQUENCY: Monthly

The 1980s, summer slashers, creepy theme parks, family mysteries – if that particular assortment of words makes you happy, then you need to know that the *Mockery Manor* podcast comprises all of these



in its monthly episodes. A long-form fiction audio drama, its story takes place in the darkest depths of England in 1989 at an oddball theme park of the same name. In addition to the naturally creepy elements of the park (including the deeply unsettling Dreamland attraction, weirdo feline mascots, and secret tunnels that run underground), Mockery Manor also has a history of people disappearing — sometimes even turning up dead. Sent to the park to work and live onsite in a staff cabin, eighteen-year-old twins Bette and J.J. (formerly known as Kate) arrive with their own dramas before being faced with the mystery of the park. Who is the woman J.J. hears screaming on a Dreamland recording, and what happened to her? Why have strange violent occurrences flared up since the twins' arrival — and why do they always seem to be caught in the middle? It's up to them to figure it all out before they become the next victims.

A work of equal parts love and creative genius, *Mockery Manor* comes from the minds at Long Cat Media: writer/director Lindsay Sharman and composer/sound designer Laurence Owen, who also lend their voices to many of the characters. Joining them is Hayley Evenett, who voices both sisters, among other parts. Not only are the performances imaginative and believable, but the soundscape is so rich that it feels as if you're actually inhabiting the park. Going above and beyond, they've created music and voice-overs for each attraction, with marketing jingles that are very of the era. In fact, one could easily imagine that Sharman and Owen came up with these audio clips first, and then found them so entertaining that the story was written around them.

While *Mockery Manor* isn't the scariest audio drama you'll come across, it has an engaging storyline and an ongoing feeling of strangeness and suspense and some gruesome sound effects. Additionally, the summer slasher vibes make it a welcome worm to the ear of any horror fan. The story also has a considerable amount of patented British humour and leans into the silliness via the park's campy atmosphere and interactions between the often peculiar staff and attendees. Although one storyline concludes in the first season, subsequent episodes follow the main characters through new adventures and into other theme parks — expanding the universe that Long Cat Media has created. If you're in the mood for a campy, slow-burn mystery with fantastic character work, *Mockery Manor* welcomes you. **JESSICA BUCK**

tow Andersson belts out husky odes to love seized in crypts, nightmares, and mortuaries, all of which makes for a heavy, catchy, spirited release that begs as much for the stadium as the cold kiss of the executioner's blade. \$\mathbb{Z} \mathbb{Z} \mathbb{Z} \mathbb{Z} \mathbb{AD}



METAL

MORGUE TERROR

Morgue Terror

(INDEPENDENT)

One look at the cover - a leering, brown-toothed clown wielding a bloody cudgel - and you can take a pretty accurate guess as to what you're getting: a functional, if largely unsurprising, slab of death metal that favours empty calories over deep, sustaining nourishment. True to form, you can tick stumpy riffs and offal-gargling vocals off your bingo card, with the whole thing coming across like a lumpen, bargain-bucket take on acts like Grave and Autopsy. Conceptually, the spectre of the two Terrifier installments looms large that Art the Clown look-alike on the sleeve is no accident, nor are track titles such as "Salt the Wound" but it's unlikely that Morgue Terror will make quite the same impact: it's fun enough for beer, pizza, and whuhthuhfuhhappenedlastnight hangover, but won't necessarily linger on in the memory once the morning's puke-shivers have abated. № ½ AD



METAL

IN AD

NECROTUM

Defleshed Exhumation

MEMENTO MORI

Is it just us, or does "Necrotum" sound like the medical term for a rotting ballbag? It's probably not the image this Romanian act hoped to conjure, but such is life.

Defleshed Exhumation presents us with a slight update on the band's tried-and-tested sound, moving from pure grunt-and-groan death metal to slightly more progressive climes. This isn't to say Necrotum has gone full Yes (heck no!) but its oozing, tentacular roil now makes occasional space for cleaner, clearer moments of unnerving ambience. Tracks like "Ghastly Metropolis," "Mouldered Orb," and "Dissolved in the Flesh Pits" (the latter seemingly referenced in the neat, gloopy Slimeweaver artwork) suggest horrors that are both psychic and ickily physical – all very admirable, though at this stage the band has a long way to go if it wants to compete with modern greats such as Tomb Mold or Astriferous. \$\\mathbb{Z}\) AD



METAL

DRIPPING DECAY

Ripping Remains

SATANIK ROYALTY

Dripping Decay released its debut full-length Festering Grotesqueries last year as though it was emptying a bucketful of body parts into a pig pen. Deftly balancing savagery with a love for splatter-packed horror, the band imbued that album with a weird sense of joy while somehow avoiding gimmickry or untoward juvenilia. This EP squelches neatly alongside said precursor, while also demonstrating a surprising range. Opener "Ripping Remains," for example, begins with a moment of Fulci-esque murk before tipping into a savage assault that showcases a fondness for both vintage grindcore (think Repulsion) and doom-laden death metal. Despite being steeped in the stink of liquescent rot, everything is crisp and clearly delineated, the features having not yet succumbed to the full ravages of the grave. This clever knack is perhaps exemplified by the Halloween cover "Trick or Treat," which retains the original's razor-sharp riffing while simultaneously miring it in sticky layers of mould, rot, and ooze.



EPENDING ON HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN WEARING DARK EYELINER AND BAT-THEMED CLOTHING, YOU MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH VAMPIREFREAKS, A

widely known brand that has been at the forefront of goth-industrial culture for over two decades now. From a social media networking (and dating) site to an online store specializing in alternative clothing, it seems that wherever there are rivetheads and *Siouxsie Sioux* lookalikes, *VampireFreaks* isn't far behind. Now that evil empire has added a music fest to its list of assets, with Dark Force Fest offering up three days of bands, vendors, and sideshow performances in Parsippany, New Jersey, this April 19 to 21.

VampireFreaks has actually been involved with music events for some time, starting out with small club nights in NYC in the early 2000s, eventually leading to the three-day goth industrial-themed Triton Festival in 2010, which occurred again in 2013. While the events

were hugely successful in terms of logistics and attendee response, there were significant financial complications due to the costs involved. After a hiatus from music fests, VampireFreaks eventually returned with Dark Side of the Con – a large convention for goth subculture that ran four times between 2018 and 2022 – which ultimately morphed into Dark Force.

"After our events, we do ask for attendee feed-back to see what people like and how we can improve," says VampireFreaks owner/founder Jet. "The feedback was that people really were coming for the live bands, so we decided to use a similar format as Dark Side of the Con and at the same awesome castle venue (The Sheraton Parsippany, believe it or not), but change it into a full-on music festival with two stages of live music. Thus, Dark Force Fest was born. We pretty much took all our favourite parts of our previous events, such as the convention aspect with vendors and panels/presentations, but with a primary focus on live industrial-gothic music."

The first Dark Force event took place last year and was the most successful VampireFreaks event to date, but 2024 promises to be even bigger and better, starting with the music lineup. Even non-goths will

recognize names like *Stabbing Westward* and *Nitzer Ebb*. For those of you more immersed in the scene, there really isn't a dud on the bill: *Auger, Nite, Then Comes Silence, Creux Lies, Biomechanimal*, and even horror punk heroes Blitzkid will be there.

"A few factors affect our booking process," explains Jet, "with the number one factor being requests and feedback from our followers, as well as a band's legacy/popularity and how well they fit into our theme. Luckily, after doing events for twenty-plus years, we do have a decent network of bands and booking agents that we have relationships with, which does make the booking process go smoother."

More than just a music fest, Dark Force promises to be an all-encompassing theatre of the bizarre tailored to children of the night.

"We've got quite a few different aspects to Dark Force Fest, including drag shows, sideshow performers, panels/presentations, a costume

contest, club nights, live movie performances, meetups, craft activities, and more," he says. "We try to make this a full experience with lots of entertainment and activities. We are proud to be inclusive of all people. We host panels and meetups for LGBTQIA+ people and BIPOC, and I think it's important to make everyone feel included and welcome. I think that because the goth scene is a subculture, it's important to embrace and accept other alternative lifestyles."

And if that wasn't enough, Dark Force will also be bringing in a real-life goth superhero!

"The NJ Batman [Joe D'Angeli] runs a yearround wildlife conservatory which is basically a
small zoo featuring exotic animals in New Jersey," says Jet. "He brings his live bats to our
event and hosts a presentation showing off the
bats and teaching people fun facts about bats.
He also hosts the bat exhibit which we host in
our 'bat cave' room, where people can come
view the bats and, if they're lucky, even be able

DARK FORCE FEST

3-DAY INDUSTRIAL-GOTHIC

MUSIC FESTIVAL + CONVENTION

APRIL 197H - 215T, 2024

THE SHERATON PARSIPPANY, NJ

to feed a bat."

Get your Dark Force tickets now and check out darkforcefest.com for more details and updates. If everything comes together, the weekend promises to be a blur.

NOW PLAYING > HOME SAFETY HOTLINE, NOXIA SOMNIA



HOME SAFETY HOTLINE

Night Signal Entertainment

Anyone who's ever worked a call centre knows it's dreadful enough to raise

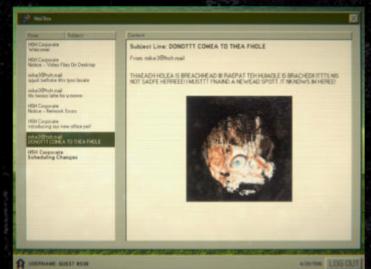
hairs. Home Safety Hotline, a cheeky point-andclick adventure from Night Signal Entertainment, pairs the horrors of wage slavery with strange home infestations and the result is an oddly heartwarming experience.

The Windows 3-inspired interface sets the era in the mid-'90s, when the common citizen had yet to enjoy the convenience of googling such topics as "ant infestation" or "what to do when a tree is growing out of your teenager's abdomen." Instead, troubled homeowners call the Home Safety Hotline, where a faithful technician (you) awaits their call. The job is simple: listen to the problem and consult your list to determine the most likely culprit. With a quick click, you'll

send the caller an information packet detailing the steps they should take — but giving the wrong advice could lead to much worse things than losing one's damage deposit. Bugs, rodents, and carbon monoxide are on file, but so are Spriggans, Kobolds, Bed Teeth, and Hobbs (sprites whose mischief includes... cleaning up after you?). Clearly, the brass at Home Safety Hotline knows an awful lot about crypto pests, but that's not to say its employees are safe — things get weird when prank calls and paranoid emails jam up the pipeline, and your supervisor Car-

ol keeps bringing up your next shift "under the soil."

As one might imagine, *Home Safety Hotline* entails a lot of reading, and the ever-growing index can feel overwhelming as it expands to include stranger and more threatening creatures. Matching the problems to their proper pests gets



surprisingly challenging, especially when HSH's network goes down and you can't consult the database. But really, this only makes the eureka moment of remembering that one answer-confirming detail that much more satisfying. The fantastical artwork that accompanies the index entries hints at the affection Night Signal has put into this title, and *Home Safety Hotline*'s well-developed lore will infest your psyche with its memorable critters.

ANDREA SUBISSATI



HEADSHOTS: IMMERSIVE, IMAGINATIVE, CHALLENGING, AND UNIQUE MISFIRES: CAN BE COMPLETED IN A SINGLE SITTING — DLC, PLEASE



NOXIA SOMNIA

Reframe Games

Many horror stories deal with mental health directly or indirectly, but perhaps none

so explicitly as *Noxia Somnia*, which couches a great big discussion concerning real-life anxiety and depression into a two-dimensional side scroller about a young man pulled into a shadow realm of monsters that feed off his fears and insecurities and seek to consume him — and the others trapped there — whole.

As main character Tristan, players battle their way through three zones drawn from places and experiences that continue to haunt him (high school, the hospital in which his grandfather died, the mall he once worked at), collecting stranded "souls" and other items for character

upgrades along the way. The creatures take on varied forms - the many-eyed Lovecraftian beasties are perhaps the most unsettling - and styles of attack, so learning the right dodge/ attack combos for each is key. Each level's big boss wanders the map and must be avoided via stealth until it's time for the final confrontation. This is where the flashlight comes into play. When Tristan's light is on, his stress meter sits at zero, but it must be turned off to fight and to avoid/outrun/escape the bosses. Too much stress? Health starts taking a hit. Fighting, exploring, and stress management are a constant balancing act. It's a solid mechanic that gets the heart pounding and remains engaging throughout the game.

The story, meanwhile, is as blunt as a sledgehammer, with the game's big bosses badgering Tristan with the equivalent of toxic negative self-talk and the Guide character routinely



sounding like a therapist. This is intentional, as Reframe Games focuses on "positive social impact through play" and *Noxia Somnia*'s Steam description calls it a "horror action game about understanding and overcoming mental health struggles."

In short, expect zero subtlety here, but if you've ever wished for a horror game and a serious life pep talk all in one, this is for you.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



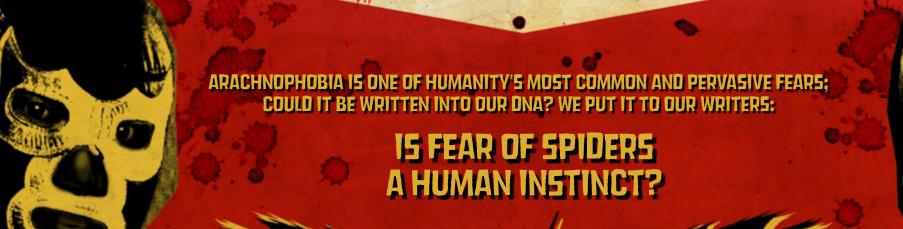
HEADSHOTS: GREAT 2-D MONSTER DESIGN, CLEVER NARRATIVE-INSPIRED CHARACTER UPGRADE SYSTEM MISFIRES: GAME'S MESSAGE IS SUPER HEAVYHANDED, ENEMY VARIETY SOMEWHAT LIMITED

HORROR CULTURE









YES!

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

"I'm supposed to believe there are people out there who find these hellbugs acceptable, even cute?"

NO!

"We'd love to explain away our most irrational and embarrassing behaviour as a genetic throwback that connects us to the animal kingdom, but that's just classic deflection."

O LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT. THERE ARE CREATURES ON THIS PLANET (I'VE HEARD THEM REFERRED TO AS "SPIDERS," BUT I CALL THEM OCTO-DEMONS) that have eight legs and spend much of their time lurking in the shadows. Sometimes they're covered in a pitch-black carapace, other times they're decked out from fangs to ass in creepy, prickly fur. They can grow to sizes that surely inspired the design for the xenomorph facehugger, and in some cases they are poisonous enough to straight-up kill a human being. But I'm supposed to believe there are people out there who find these hellbugs acceptable, even cute?

No, I will not sit idly by and let this pro-spider propaganda continue unanswered. All this bullshit about spiders being a necessary part of the ecosystem, feeding on pests like flies and mosquitoes? Rubbish. Mosquitos do little more than give people love-bites. Spiders will literally jump out of holes they've crafted to ambush you and your family. Or they'll just spin giant webs whose sole purpose is to make me flail around my backyard trying to get the evil butt silk off my face.

Meanwhile we've got social media accounts that feature people's "adorable" pet spiders doing all kinds of delightful things like jumping on them and crawling around on their faces? You've got to be fucking kidding me. The only reasonable explanation here is that spiders have begun taking influencers hostage, puppeting them to push pro-spider narratives under threat of injecting millions of spider eggs into their faces whilst they sleep.

One of my proudest achievements as a human being has been to adjust my point of view on spiders in the house from "kill on sight" to humanely escorting them out via a long, painstaking process involving a bowl and a sheet of paper. It literally takes fifteen minutes of hand-wringing, and for days afterward I'm convinced that wretched fucker let himself and five of his friends back into my house. But yeah, I'm sure there are people who just find them precious. Liars.

'M SO SICK OF PEOPLE USING ARMCHAIR SCIENCE TO JUSTIFY ACTING LIKE 🔼 CHILDREN. THERE'S A PREVAILING MYTH THAT THE REASON ARACHNOPHOBIA is so common is because at one point in human evolution, it benefitted our species to be wary of the tiny creatures. The idea is that those who feared spiders were more likely to survive being exposed to them, and then, these insufferable wimps would reproduce with other insufferable wimps, and pass along that coward gene to future generations to protect them from this insurmountable eight-legged threat. Yes, it's exactly as stupid as it sounds, precisely as stupid as those edgelords on the internet who claim to be "alpha males" as an excuse to sniff each other's ass-

holes to determine who's in charge (I mean, have at 'er). We'd love to explain away our most irrational and embarrassing behaviour as a genetic throwback that connects us to the animal kingdom, but that's just classic deflection. Humanity holds the crown for being the single biggest threat to our own natural environment (go us), making us about as close to the "natural world" as a gas station slushie machine.

The truth is much less ivory tower/social sciences than basement-level common sense: as children, we saw our moms (either real or adopted via TV) leap onto kitchen chairs when they spotted a spider, shrieking for the man of the house to come save them. Don't believe me? Explain why more women report being afraid of spiders than men.

This isn't to say that arachnophobia isn't a real thing, mind you. I'll allow that spiders are both creepy looking and frankly fucking gross, and were one caught properly by surprise, a certain degree of chair-hopping hysteria is in order. But conlittle factoid, armchair biologists: only 0.1% of all spider species in the entire world are poisonous enough to harm a person. We're more likely to develop a phobia of sheer human stupidity, but I'm not holding my breath.

sider this

WOULD GEORGE A. ROMERO BE HAPPY ABOUT THE

THE GODFATHER OF GORE WOULD BE PLEASED WITH THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ZOMBIE SUBGENRE.







ForteanTimes



PRESENTS

GHOSTS AND HAUNTINGS SPECTRES, SPOOKS AND RESTLESS SPIRITS

From the archives of FORTEAN TIMES, the world's foremost journal of strange phenomena, comes a new collection exploring the world of ghosts, poltergeists and haunted houses.

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